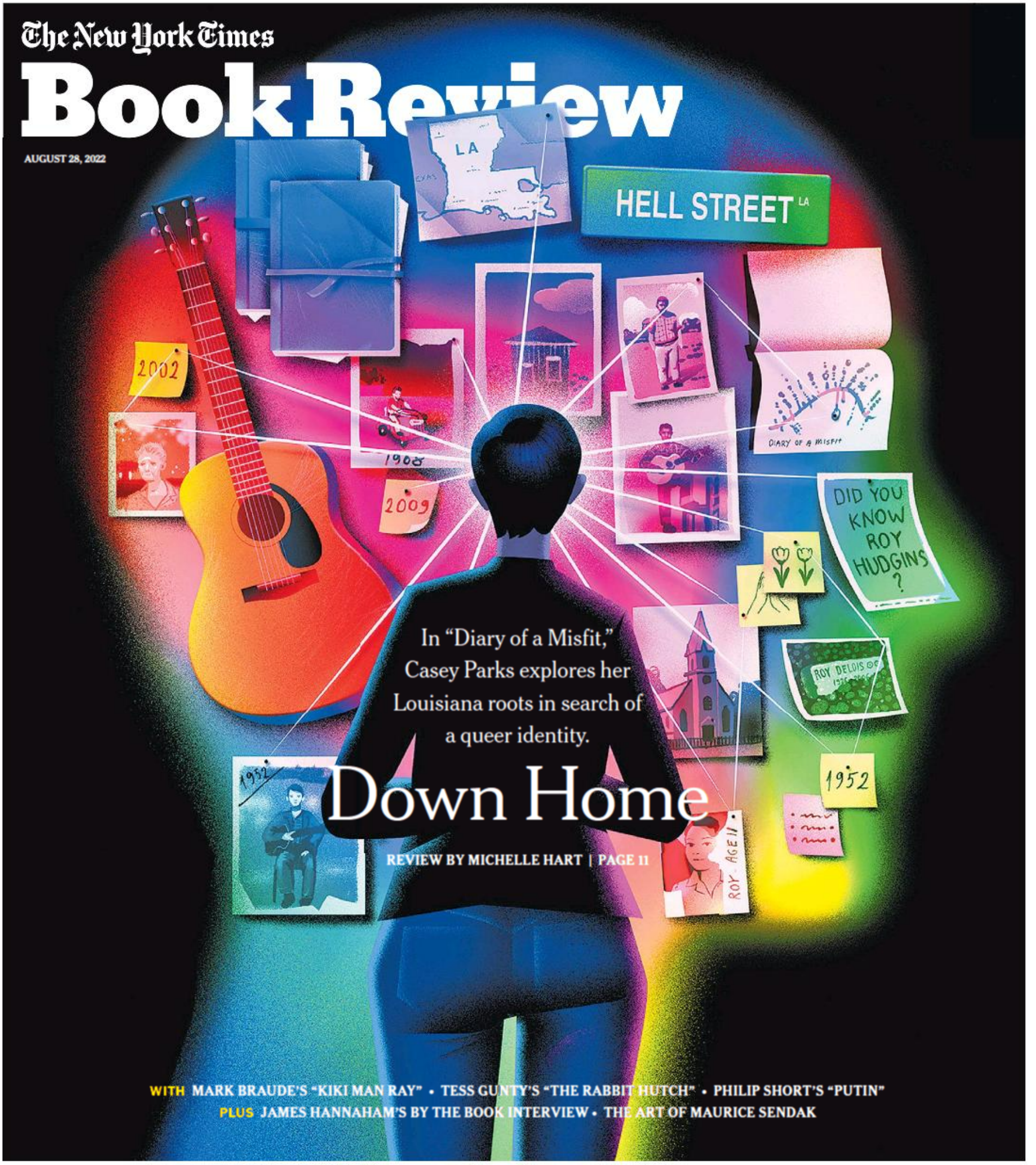
The New York Times
Book Review
AUGUST 28, 2022



In "Diary of a Misfit," Casey Parks explores her Louisiana roots in search of a queer identity.

Down Home

REVIEW BY MICHELLE HART | PAGE 11

WITH MARK BRAUDE'S "KIKI MAN RAY" • TESS GUNTY'S "THE RABBIT HUTCH" • PHILIP SHORT'S "PUTIN"
PLUS JAMES HANNAHAM'S BY THE BOOK INTERVIEW • THE ART OF MAURICE SENDAK

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—The Wall Street Journal

"ENGAGING...[Recounts] the author's 2,000-mile journey from Pittsburgh to New Orleans aboard a purpose-built wooden flatboat...A TRAVEL WRITER WHO DELIGHTS IN INCONGRUITY AND IN HISTORY'S RHYMES."
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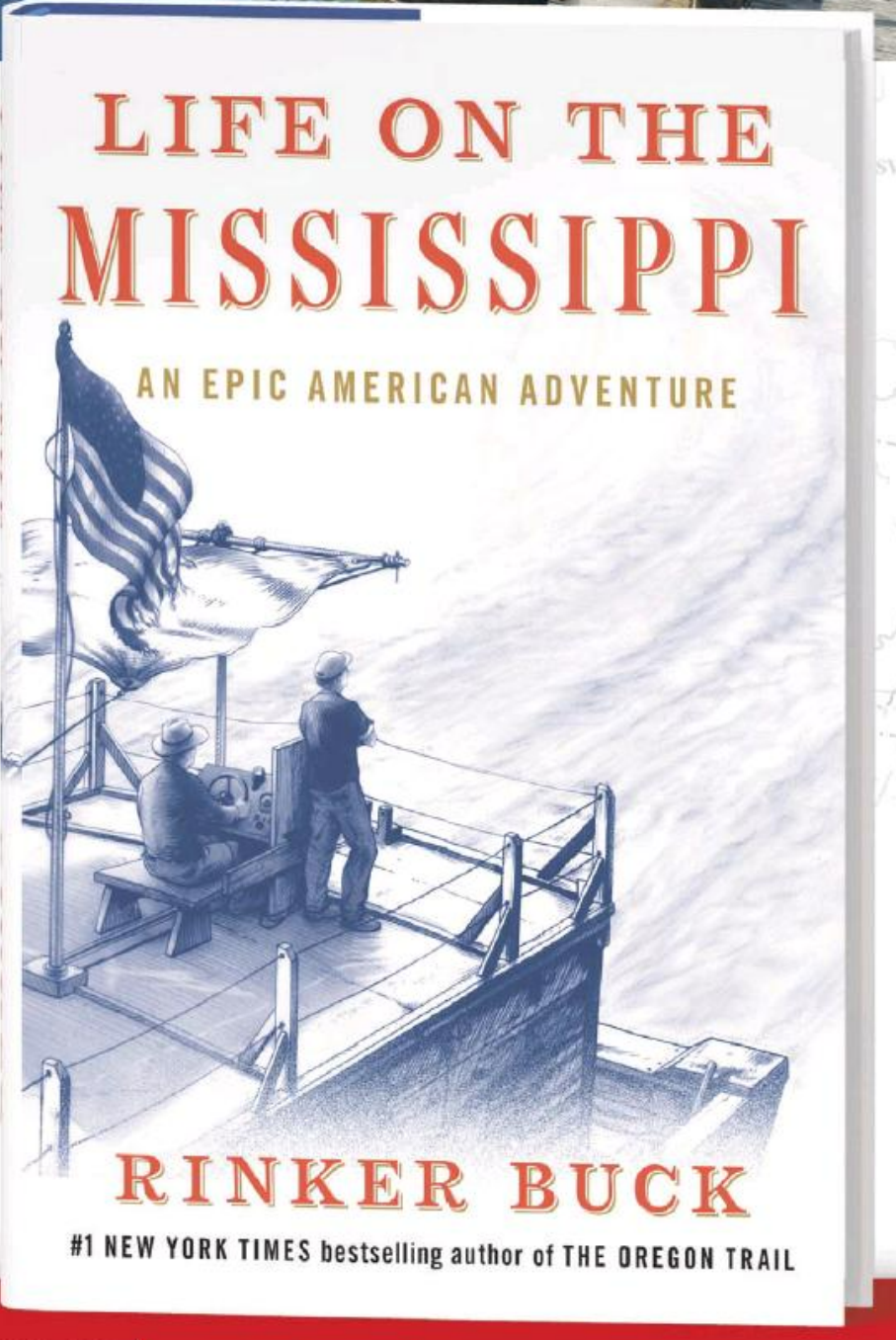
"CAPTIVATING...Rough-edged, well informed, and honest about his own blind spots, Buck is a winning tour guide. American history buffs and armchair adventurers will relish the trip."
—Publishers Weekly



AUTHOR PHOTO © DAN CORJULO

Watch video of Rinker aboard his flatboat *Patience* and join him on his cross-country book tour!

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Book Review

The New York Times
AUGUST 28, 2022

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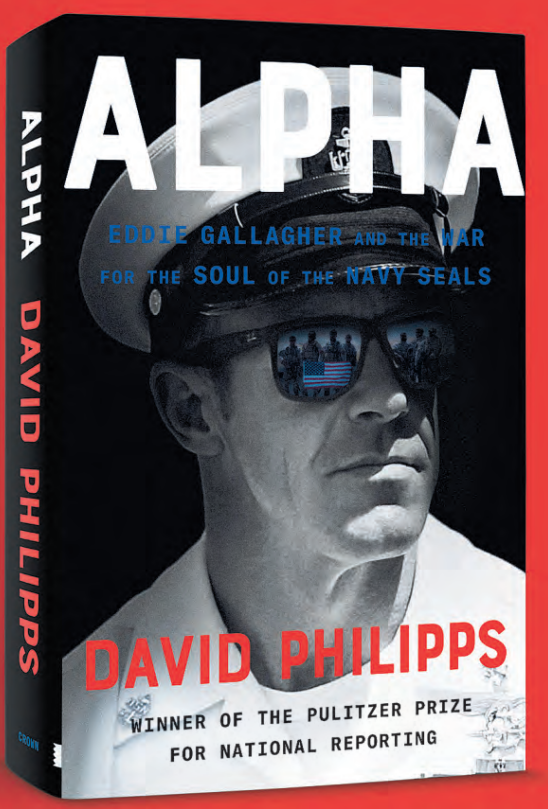
FROM THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING NEW YORK TIMES REPORTER

A SEARING TALE OF POWER, JUSTICE, AND THE PRICE OF LOYALTY



"An important, infuriating, meticulously researched account of modern warfare that I found nearly impossible to put down."

—JON KRAKAUER,
author of *Into the Wild*

CROWN

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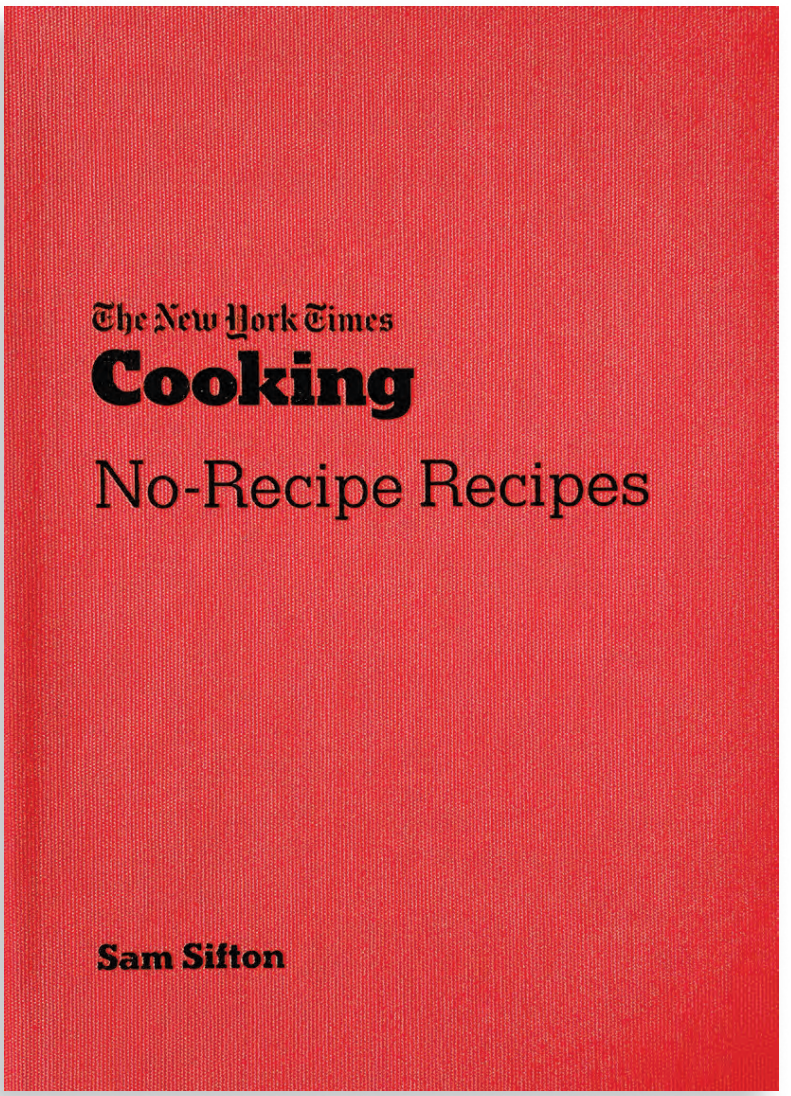
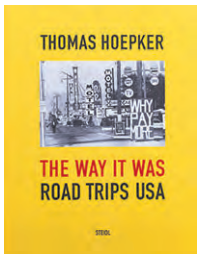


The New York Times Cooking

TEN SPEED PRESS

Newly Published / Visuals

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Late Works, 1988-2009, by Douglas Dreishpoon, Suzanne Boorsch et al. (Radius Books/Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, $65.) This collection celebrates Frankenthaler's famed soak-stain technique and the continuity in her art after her pivot away from canvas paintings, complementing exhibitions of her work across the United States.



THOMAS HOEPKER: The Way It Was: Road Trips U.S.A., by Thomas Hoepker. Edited by Freddy Langer. (Steidl, $50.) Juxtaposing images from Hoepker's two cross-country road trips — one in 1963 for a German magazine and the other in 2020 as a seasoned photojournalist — this collection starkly renders the passage of time.

HIERONYMUS BOSCH: Time and Transformation in "The Garden of Earthly Delights," by Margaret D. Carroll. (Yale University, $35.) A former Wellesley professor presents a deeply researched and original analysis of Bosch's famous painting to argue it does not condemn sin but rather explores the human condition in nature.

PAUL, by Harry Benson. (Taschen, $70.) The prolific photographer who took the famous "pillow fight" picture of the Beatles offers a personal portrait of Paul McCartney, whom he has been photographing since the 1960s, in celebration of the musician's 80th birthday.

...Also Out Now

CARRIE SOTO IS BACK, by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Ballantine, $28.) Carrie Soto, first introduced in Reid's 2021 novel, "Malibu Rising," retired from tennis as the best female player in the world. Six years later, when her Grand Slam record is threatened by a promising upstart, Carrie comes out of retirement to break it first.

HOUSE ON FIRE: Fighting for Democracy in the Age of Political Arson, by David N. Cicilline. (Twelve, $29.) The congressman from Rhode Island, who was also the first openly gay mayor of Providence, outlines his career from working as a criminal defense attorney amid 1980s mob violence to co-managing President Trump's 2021 impeachment trial, and argues for reforms to strengthen what he sees as our weakened democracy.

SHE'S NICE THOUGH: Essays on Being Bad at Being Good, by Mia Mercado. (HarperOne, $27.99.) A Kansas-based cultural critic interrogates pop culture and dissects the social mores holding American society together in this sharp essay collection that celebrates our collective insecurities and failures.

TORNADO OF LIFE: A Doctor's Journey Through Constraints and Creativity in the ER, by Jay Baruch. (MIT, $27.95.) In this collection of brief, touching essays, an emergency room doctor presents poignant stories about disease and loneliness and argues that medical professionals are "stewards" of their patients' stories, morally obligated to look beyond data and tests.

"Tracy Crosswhite is one of the best protagonists in the realm of crime fiction today."

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ROBERT DUGONI

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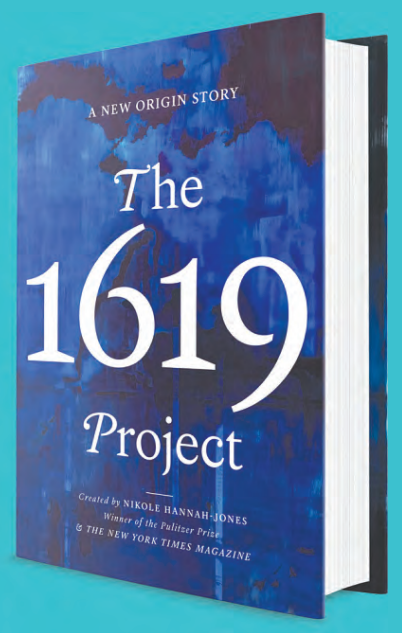
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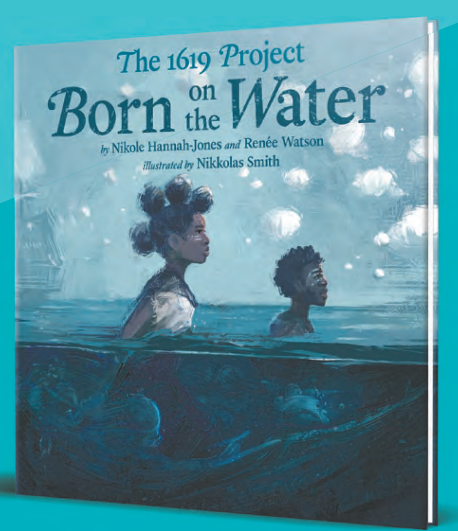

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Letters

A Guinness beer advertisement from 1932.

Brewmaster

TO THE EDITOR:
Although it took me six days to get around to reading the Aug. 7 Book Review, I was delighted to see that the review of Camper English's "Doctors and Distillers: The Remarkable Medicinal History of Beer, Wine, Spirits, and Cocktails" was written by J.D. Biersdorfer, whose German surname means "from the village of beer." What could I do but order it immediately?

HOWARD L. RITTER JR.
PERRYSBURG, OHIO

A Life Appreciation

TO THE EDITOR:
The grim portrayal of Dorothy Rodgers in Daniel Okrent's review of "Shy" (Aug. 7) focuses only on the troubled private relationship with her daughter Mary, while making no mention of her exceptional public role in government and philanthropy.

In the 1970s, I had the great opportunity to work with Dorothy at the New York State Council on the Arts, where she chaired the Performing Arts Committee. I became director of the council's theater division in 1976 and arrived as a total stranger to Dorothy. Almost immediately, she became a true mentor — generous, wise, strategic and very witty. The council's young performing arts pros were devoted to her, and she to us. Many of us happily kept up with her long after we moved on to other jobs.

Dorothy was a strategic cultural force who understood that for a state agency as young and fragile as the arts council, precedents were being set. She fought hard against any political interference from Albany and insisted that she and her fellow board members never put their personal tastes above creativity. There were many instances when Dorothy advocated passionately for the support of artists whose work she disliked because she so deeply respected established process and the theater professionals who might disagree with her. Dorothy didn't always win her battles, but she held everyone to a very high ethical standard.

Decades later, I'm still grateful to have been a part of Dorothy's remarkable public life, one that reached so far beyond the troubles of her home.

ROBERT MARX
NEW YORK

Rural Realities

TO THE EDITOR:
One wonders how Beth Macy, in her By the Book interview (Aug. 14), can believe that people in rural America, as she put it, "haven't had everything handed to them," intimating that our nation's urban dwellers have. Mississippi, Kentucky, Alaska and West Virginia are among the states most dependent on federal assistance. People living in rural areas are more likely to benefit from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly called food stamps) than those in cities, as well as several other forms of governmental assistance that aim to help people, often families, whom our economy is failing.

Portrayals of rural Americans as self-reliant, handout-eschewing stoics are not only inaccurate, but also tone deaf to the struggles of hard-working people across the country, in places large and small, and serve a destructive narrative that is dividing our nation.

DAVID ALAIN WOHL
CARRBORO, N.C.

♦

TO THE EDITOR:
Like Beth Macy, I wish that more authors would write about people in rural America. If she has not yet discovered the brilliance of Kathryn Magendie, Ann Pancake, Ron Rash and Joshua Senter, I strongly recommend that she do so. Their works have given me insight into a land and people of whom I was previously pretty dismissive and ignorant. And if she, like me, emails them or finds them on social media, they will turn her on to others. Their talents are on par with their generosity.

JACQUI ROSE
BROOKLYN

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

IMAGE FROM HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

James Hannaham

The author, whose new novel is 'Didn't Nobody Give a Shit What Happened to Carlotta,' resists the idea of genre: 'Wasn't it Louis Armstrong who said there are only two types of music — good and bad?'

What's the last great book you read?

"The Candy House," by Jennifer Egan — the woman who taught me everything I know. Well, really, my mother was, but Jenny is definitely the No. 2 person on the People Who Taught Me Stuff Countdown. (If it seems that I only read books by people I know, that is *almost* true.) "The Candy House" is really an incredible feat just formally, a sequel to "Goon Squad" expanding on that much-lauded work and moving its collective narrative forward; astonishing, even a little bewildering! I see where people on the internet are making charts to keep all the story lines straight and rereading "Goon Squad" to refresh their memories. I know Jenny has a Pulitzer and other awards, but I still feel that she is shockingly underrated. She should have the kind of fawning sycophants that dudes like Franzen and Denis Johnson do. Let the cult begin herewith!

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

I recently read "Frankenstein" with a class where I developed the curriculum in collaboration with the students. It's really strange to read "Frankenstein" after having experienced the public image of Frankenstein for so many decades. At first I couldn't keep from casting Fred Gwynne from "The Munsters" in the part of the monster, but then it dawned on me that the book takes place in Switzerland, so that made me wonder which language the monster might be speaking. It blew my mind to realize that the monster has a very long monologue in the middle of that book — in French! After that, I started imagining André the Giant as the monster. Which would have been really cool.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

It's the year 2500, and technology has arrived that makes it possible for readers to hold any book in their hands for five minutes and get the full experience of reading it in its entirety, to absorb its narratives as if they'd been there, and to remember everything perfectly. Having been liberated from death, I'm reading the entire library during a long-haul trip in a spaceship-slash-library, while on the way to some beachy planet, or artist residency world. Where I can also read books this way while sitting on the beach and/or working on something new, and they allow spouses who can work remotely. There's probably also a similar technology that polishes your first drafts and comes over with Moroccan mint tea for encouraging studio visits.

Do you count any books as guilty pleasures?

Not really, but I don't let everyone know right off the bat how much I was influenced by "Psychopathia Sexualis."

Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

I'm certain that people whose books I've reviewed negatively are holding grudges against me, but that's probably not what you mean.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

Things that are not themselves?

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

Wasn't it Louis Armstrong who said there are only two types of music — good and bad? I feel the same about books. I like good. I don't really like the idea of genre, it should really be left to the marketing department to figure that out. Authors shouldn't have to do that work!

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

Someone who didn't know me well might be surprised to find Nate Silver's "The Signal and the Noise," maybe, a book that really affected the way I think about probability in very positive ways. I thought that book should have been more of a blockbuster, but that may just be further evidence of my nerdiness.

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

Most of them. ☐

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.

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River Country

A writer takes a long journey aboard a 19th-century-style flatboat to examine American history.

By BEN McGRATH

Rinker Buck explored the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers on a wooden flatboat named Patience.

A DRY CLEANER IN Yankton, S.D., once told me that he had spied so many fussily costumed boaters from the banks of the nearby Missouri River that he'd grown weary of new arrivals. "People are recreating Lewis and Clark," he said. "It happens here all the time." He loved the river, for its waterfowl and promise of imaginative escape, but not always its thru-traveling flock, who, if not reprising the migration of previous generations, often seemed to be proselytizing for one thing or another: energy independence, say, or sobriety. "Some of these people are a little on their high horse, you know?" he said. To meet a wanderborne voyager whose only cause was wanderlust: *That* was novel.

LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI
An Epic American Adventure
By Rinker Buck
386 pp. Avid Reader Press. $32.50.

I thought of my conversation with the dry cleaner while reading Rinker Buck's engaging "Life on the Mississippi: An Epic American Adventure," which recounts the author's 2,000-mile journey from Pittsburgh to New Orleans aboard a purpose-built wooden flatboat, like the ones used by Appalachian farmers in the decades after the Revolutionary War. His rotating crew includes a sometime Meriwether Lewis impersonator whom Buck loathes, not only for his casual racism and misogyny but for his pretension — archaic speech, suitcase bulging with 19th-century outfits.

Historical re-enactors, Buck writes, are "overdressed losers." Readers of his previous book, "The Oregon Trail: A New American Journey," will recognize the particular sensitivity. For that entertaining project, Buck traversed the old pioneer route by covered wagon, while railing against those purists who would lament the intrusions of asphalt and soft serve. The frontier was ever debased. Still, you might say that Buck is a re-enactor by another name: a travel writer, who delights in incongruity and in history's rhymes.

He also comes by his wanderlust organically. When he was 7, in 1958, Buck accompanied his parents and siblings on a wagon ride through New Jersey and Pennsylvania to "see America slowly," as his father, a magazine publisher, put it. When he was 15, and more inclined toward speed, he joined an older brother in the cockpit of a Piper Cub and leapfrogged the continent. "We had only a shopping bag full of maps, no radio and a compass that barely worked," he writes. "Follow the highways, son," his father would say, "or pick out a river."

BEN MCGRATH, *a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of "Riverman: An American Odyssey."*

The rivers at the heart of this book are not just the oft-chronicled one in the title (borrowed, of course, from Mark Twain) but also the Ohio, which set a young country in westward motion and thereby defined Americans "as a migratory people," Buck writes, "radically departed from our European antecedents." Some followed the water's gravitational pull only to sell their wares, and the timber on which they drifted, and hoof back. Others resettled downstream. At the time of the country's birth, about 3 percent of the non-Native population resided west of the Appalachian range. By 1830, that figure had floated to 30 percent. "At the edge of civilization in North America, at the wharves and bursting river towns of the new territories, social caste and standing belonged to the uprooted, the wayfarers, the self-made men and boys struggling with their oars to land a broadhorn against the current."

BROADHORN WAS ANOTHER NAME for a flatboat — square of bow, shallow of draft and requiring little in the way of construction expertise — because the long, curved steering oars were wielded from atop the cabin and appeared like giant horns at a squint. Buck names his flatboat Patience — and opts, pragmatically, for an inboard motor, which he pilots from the roof deck, like his predecessors. His heightened perch is the perfect vantage both for admiring the landscape of conservation forest punctuated by Rust Belt blight, and for contemplating the economic winds that have lately roiled our politics. The decline of the steel industry, he observes, stirred a different type of growth, with sprigs of aspen and birch extruding from West Virginian smokestacks and window transoms. "The persistence of man was dramatically yielding to the persistence of nature," Buck writes.

Coal was another matter: too recently decimated, by offshore drilling and fracking, for nature's reclamation to inspire awe. Many marinas, meanwhile, were abandoned, casualties of the 2008 recession and subsequent flooding. The loss of so much disposable income meant fewer fishermen and water skiers, which in turn led to a reduction of refueling stations. A savvy crew member of the Patience charms a struggling business owner into donating several crucial backup gas tanks to the mission by slagging the federal government. Surveying the lonely river valley, Buck has the realization that the same ridgelines that lent feelings of containment and serenity to a boat captain effectively shielded the extent of deindustrialization from the still-bustling interstates on the far sides. Geography is destiny. No wonder the populist groundswell of 2016 caught so many landlubbers by surprise.

"You're going to die," everyone warns Buck, both before and throughout an adventure in which he never comes close. I hesitate to identify this as a disappointment, though I suspect the author would sympathize with this reader's yearning for vicarious adversity to match his riparian surroundings. If Buck is a proselytizer for any cause while afloat, it may be for the perverse pleasure associated with cracking one's ribs, which he does — memorably, and for the fifth time — while balancing a tray of biscuits and gravy, eggs and bacon ("real food, trucker chow") for his crew and ascending a poplar staircase to the deck amid oncoming rollers from a tug. The breakfast survives his fall intact; the rib cage does not. "I like what being a champion rib-breaker says about my life," he writes. "Rib breaks and their pain are a reminder of my foolhardiness, perhaps, or my addiction to adventure, or my need for comeuppance for having led such a fortunate, happy life." □

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL CORJULA

Time Warps

GILLIAN MCALLISTER'S TENSE new book begins as a woman waits for her beloved teenage son to come home late one night. But then she sees something inexplicable: the boy, Todd, running toward a stranger on the darkened suburban street — and stabbing him to death. "I had to," he says cryptically as he is led away in handcuffs. "There was no choice."

What a nightmare! But things are about to get even more disorienting in **WRONG PLACE WRONG TIME (Morrow, 402 pp., $28.99)**, a high-concept mash-up of different genres that transcends its wackadoodle premise with an affecting portrayal of a family careening toward crisis.

When the shattered mother, Jen, wakes up the next morning, she finds that she has traveled back in time, to the day before the murder. The following morning it's two days earlier — T-2, let's say. Soon Jen is living in reverse order, skipping months and even years, yet always aware of what is to come. Something seems to be propelling her to act as a kind of private detective investigating her family's secrets-laden history. Can she find the spot in the past where it all went wrong, and repair the future?

As Jack Finney did in his classic time-bending novel, "Time and Again," McAllister establishes a set of rules governing the strange world she has created. Hers are fairly sparse, though. The biggest logical problems — how come Jen isn't altering the future every time she does anything, and how will she eventually return to the present — are explained away in a few interesting but leap-of-faith paragraphs.

But the science isn't the point of this twisty book by a writer with a fine grasp of the subtleties of familial dysfunction. The story becomes unexpectedly tender as Jen moves further back in time, in awe of the youth she let slip by so easily, and shocked by how much she did not know.

SARAH LYALL *is a writer at large, working for a variety of desks including Sports, Culture, Media and International.*

LIV REESE, the main character in Megan Goldin's highly diverting **STAY AWAKE (St. Martin's, 340 pp., $27.99)**, has her own sleep-related challenges. Each time she wakes up, she finds that all her recent memories — anything that happened within the past two years — have been erased from her mind. Like the tortured protagonist of the movie "Memento," she desperately leaves clues for herself — on paper, on the walls and on her skin — to remind her of the things she keeps forgetting.

DOEUN CHOI

This is all bad enough, as it involves showing up at an apartment that is no longer hers, calling former friends on numbers that no longer exist and wondering why, when she goes to the office, her colleagues tell her she no longer works there. But imagine her dismay when she learns she is wanted for killing a man she has never met in an apartment she has no recollection of visiting. Someone has scrawled the words "WAKE UP" on the window in the victim's blood — the same message written in ballpoint pen on her own wrist.

Goldin disorients the reader by deploying multiple timelines — the present, several days ago and two years earlier, when Liv told the police she was being harassed by a stalker. They didn't take her seriously, given that one of the things the stalker apparently did was to leave a new carton of milk in her fridge, but their skepticism seems to have had fatal consequences.

In the current timeline, the police are conducting another investigation, wasting time by jumping from one poorly thought-out conclusion to the next. In this race against time, it is imperative to find out what really happened two years earlier — and to prepare for the moment when the past finally collides with the present.

INCHOATE DREAD HANGS over **HOKULOA ROAD (Mulholland Books, 388 pp., $28)**, Elizabeth Hand's novel set on a fictional Hawaiian island during the pandemic's dark early days. Hotels and stores are closed, abandoned cars litter the roads, homelessness is rampant. Someone has scrawled "NEVER FORGET THE MISSING" on the side of a two-story building, over the names of people who have inexplicably vanished. They haven't died from Covid: "People disappear here," the main character, Grady Kendall, is told when he arrives on the island.

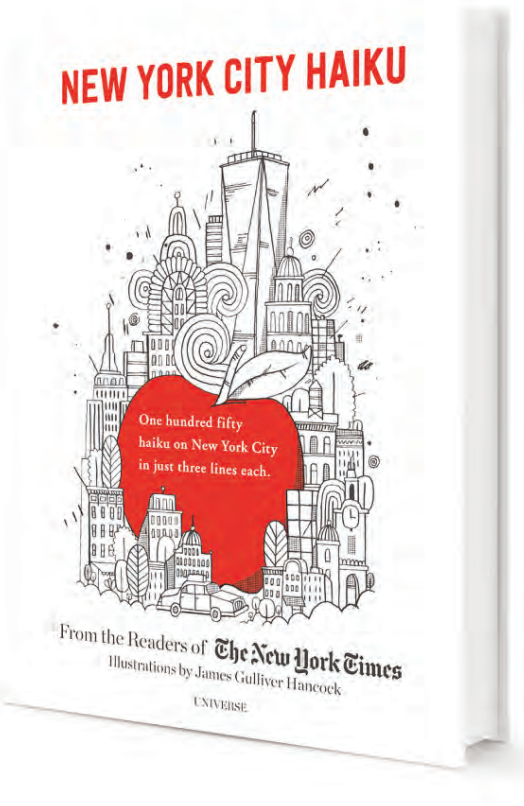
Kendall is an out-of-work carpenter who, after a curious Zoom interview in which he's asked, "Ever performed an appendectomy on yourself?," lands a job as a caretaker for a remote estate on Hokuloa Road, which is marked by a sign saying "Dangerous Road. No Cell Service. Drive at Own Risk."

Indeed, "Hokuloa can be really intense. Be careful after dark," he's warned before meeting his boss, Wes Minton, an eccentric billionaire (is there another kind?).

A terrifying animal — maybe a wild dog, maybe a jetlag-induced chimera — looms suddenly outside Grady's door. There is an aviary full of birds that might be extinct, a tank of poisonous sea urchins and a mysterious locked room. What evil lurks on the island?

The book sometimes moves too slowly, stepping on its revelations with overabundant detail. But it revs up toward the end, and it is brilliantly atmospheric. "The profusion of colors made him anxious," Hand writes. "There was too much of everything here: too many stars at night, too many strange smells, too many sounds." □

One hundred fifty haiku on New York City in just three lines each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CRIME & MYSTERY / BY SARAH WEINMAN

Tracked by Killers

FOR SOME REASON, William Kent Krueger's work has always left me cold. I shied away even as the crime-writing world showered him with awards. But after reading **FOX CREEK (Atria, 388 pp., $28)**, the 19th outing for the part-Irish, part-Ojibwe Minnesota detective Cork O'Connor, I'm at a loss to explain my earlier reticence.

A man calling himself Louis Morriseau approaches Cork for help, claiming that his wife, Dolores, has run away with someone named Henry Moleux. Must be a lover, Morriseau surmises, but Cork knows better: Henry, an Ojibwe elder and healer, is his wife's uncle. He's also over 100 years old, with a face "like the shell of a map turtle, etched with so many lines there could be one for every year of his existence." Something else is going on. Soon Henry, Rainy — Cork's wife — and Dolores disappear into the woods, tracked by despicable men with cross-border secrets.

This genuinely thrilling and atmospheric novel brims with characters who are easy to root for. The pacing isn't perfect — I could have done with fewer chapters in the bad guys' heads — but when Cork, Henry and the others faced mortal danger, my heart leaped into my throat. For those new to the series, "Fox Creek" is a strong entry point.

THE FIELD OF contemporary psychological suspense has many practitioners, but one who gets surprisingly little attention these days is Joy Fielding, Canada's answer to the late, great Mary Higgins Clark. I still remember gasping at the twists of "Kiss Mommy Goodbye" and "See Jane Run," and I admire Fielding's ability to write relentlessly paced novels.

That admiration extends, mostly, to her 30th outing, **THE HOUSEKEEPER (Ballantine, 368 pp. $28)**. As the real estate agent Jodi Bishop will discover, introducing Elyse Woodley into her parents' lives to help care for her mother, who has Parkinson's, will have grave consequences — manipulation, seduction, betrayal, death.

"In the end, I have only myself to blame," Jodi tells the reader. "I'm the one who let her in." But Jodi's inability to understand what was happening is related to the damage, casual and deliberate, inflicted by the men in her life (particularly her self-centered jerk of a husband, Harrison, a real piece of work whom Fielding clearly enjoys portraying in all his unctuous non-glory).

Even when I groaned at the repeated use of obvious foreshadowing ("but I'm getting ahead of myself" is a phrase to be forever struck from crime novels), I never put "The Housekeeper" down — I read it in a single sitting.

PABLO AMARGO

THE BRITISH-BORN, Texas-based author Mark Pryor set an acclaimed contemporary series in Paris featuring Hugo Marston, the security chief at the United States Embassy. He returns to the City of Light, circa 1940, with **DIE AROUND SUNDOWN (Minotaur, 310 pp., $27.99)**, which introduces a new series police detective, Henri Lefort.

The Nazi occupation and ongoing war make it exceedingly difficult for Lefort to fulfill his newest assignment: investigating the death of a high-ranking German military officer at the Louvre despite being barred from the scene ("the museum is off limits to all French citizens"). The Germans have given Lefort a mere seven days to solve the murder, which he'll have to do with help from his great friend Nicola (and more famous figures like Marie Bonaparte and Pablo Picasso). "We would like the Führer, should he find out about this incident, to learn that a French policeman has solved the crime," an SS officer tells him. "It will reassure him that things are as normal as possible here in Paris and that you are cooperating with us fully."

Lefort is complex and unreliable enough to stoke intrigue without being so untrustworthy that he annoys the reader. Pryor's immersion in World War II history feels a trifle shallow, and I wish the writing were more robust. But for those who miss the gallows humor and righteous anger of Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther mysteries, "Die Around Sundown" credibly fills the void, and augurs well for future installments.

ON A RECENT WEEKEND when my mood refused to lighten, when it seemed as if the torrent of bad news might topple my defenses for good, what helped bring me out of it was **TWO PARTS SUGAR, ONE PART MURDER (Kensington, 272 pp., paper, $16.95)**, the first in Valerie Burns's captivating new series featuring a social media influencer turned bakeshop owner, Maddy Montgomery, and her stalwart crew of "Baker Street Irregulars."

Shortly after being dumped during her wedding livestream, Maddy gets an unexpected bequest from her great-aunt Octavia, necessitating Maddy's move to northern Michigan to take over the bakery, Octavia's battered old house and a 200-pound mastiff, Baby. Oh — and solve a murder or two with the help of all her new friends.

Figuring out who did it is perhaps too easy but no matter — the charm is watching Maddy shed her glamorous passivity for down-to-earth action. Snappy dialogue, a well-drawn supporting cast and an irresistible canine companion all add delicious flavor. Gulp this book down or savor it, but consuming it will guarantee a sustained sugar high. □

SARAH WEINMAN'S *Crime & Mystery column appears twice a month.*

Down Home

Casey Parks explores her Louisiana roots in search of a queer identity.

By MICHELLE HART

THERE WAS THE elementary school gym teacher rumored to have been in a lesbian relationship with the woman who taught science. There was the hair stylist who flicked his wrist when he spoke and only half-hid hints of his nightlife in drag. There was the androgynous ticket-taker at the art museum who gave back a knowing glance, the softball player, the tween poet and painter. There was Matthew Shepard.

Figures like these frequently populate (and sometimes haunt) the childhoods of L.G.B.T.Q. people, our first brushes with queerness, those "Ring of Keys" moments when we recognized the obfuscated parts of ourselves in someone else. These individuals make up a kind of constructed mythology for us; our own stories are so often an assemblage of the tales — cautionary and celebratory — that came before. They're embodied intimations of who we could become.

DIARY OF A MISFIT
A Memoir and a Mystery
By Casey Parks
356 pp. Knopf. $29.

For the author and journalist Casey Parks, there was the short-haired church singer; the preteen babysitter whose adolescent expressions of inchoate desire got her excised from their deeply religious Louisiana community; the cute, well-read barista named Ellen (naturally), whose eventual dinner invitation the adult Parks still has trouble discerning as a date (of course).

But the figure who looms largest in Parks's expansive reported memoir, "Diary of a Misfit," is someone the author never actually met or saw in person.

In 2002, when Parks was in college, she kissed another girl for the first time. A few weeks later, in church back home in West Monroe, La., on Easter Sunday, she came out as gay to her mother, with whom she had always been close but who now reacted with shock and dismay. The teenage Parks tried to recant her revelation — "I'm going to date Richard from Blockbuster," she pleaded. "He's 6 foot 5, like Aidan in 'Sex and the City.'" But her mother kept on crying. That is, until *her* mother, Parks's grandmother, barged into the bathroom where this tearful exchange was taking place and admonished her daughter: "Some people eat hot dogs, and some people eat fish." The message was: Get over it.

The source of her grandmother Louise's ostensible progressivism, Parks discovered later that day, was someone she'd known in girlhood: "I grew up across the street from a woman who lived as a man,"

Roy, in an undated photo.

she told her astonished granddaughter ("this was 2002, years before people began signing their emails with their pronouns"). This simple, almost cavalier admission became in many ways the inciting incident of Parks's adulthood, a key to the latch of future happiness.

The person's name was Roy. Louise had met him in the early '50s, in her rural Louisiana hometown of Delhi (pronounced Dell-HIGH), on a road known locally as Hell Street. (The town's only tourist attraction? A monument called Poverty Point.) He was a country singer and songwriter who played, Louise claimed, "the most beautiful music I ever heard." For Louise, the lonesome daughter of day laborers who had recently left the swampy Mississippi farmstead she'd come to love, Roy was a kindred spirit, another lost soul. He'd play aching Hank Williams songs on his porch for the kids who lived on Hell Street. He was good-looking, hard-working, kept mostly to himself but radiated warmth. She eventually learned that Roy had been born Delois, a girl, but lived the rest of his life as a male. After Louise married and left Delhi, she lost track of Roy.

Perhaps a bit facetiously, Parks's grandmother tells her that this story was "the beginning of *me* coming out." But it was no joke for Parks. Roy was loved simply because he was a good person, Louise tells her granddaughter, who herself desperately "wanted to believe that people would accept me just because I was good." Parks asks her grandmother if Roy was happy, had ever been happy, and since Louise can't provide answers, Parks sets off in search of them. "I kept digging into Roy's life hoping some stray fact might reveal something to me," she writes. "I didn't want to die feeling as if I'd never fit anywhere."

FOR AN ENTIRE DECADE, from 2009 to 2019, Parks, who was then living in Portland, traveled back and forth to Delhi to learn whatever she could about Roy and his fate. She speaks with townspeople who might have known him — the cagey neighbors to whom he entrusted his journals, a member of his Pentecostal church group, a worker at the nursing home at which the elderly Roy was forced to present as female. Protected by the neighbors who refused to let her see them, the journals are what Parks yearns for most throughout these nearly 400 pages, the chance to read Roy's story in his own words.

Mostly everyone Parks interviews misgenders Roy. Each time this happens, the reader can't help flinching, but these moments also crystallize what makes Parks's lionhearted investigation so vital, especially in 2022, when the rights of trans people to live on their own terms are being stripped from them every day. What's at stake, past the journalistic mystery, is someone's selfhood, the necessity of self-definition.

This does, of course, raise a few issues. In 2009, Parks began prying into the circumstances of Roy's life partially as a backdoor audition to work for "This American Life." While reading, I thought often of "S-Town," the podcast produced by "This American Life"'s Brian Reed, about an eccentric Alabamian clockmaker whose tragic story becomes a sort of Trojan horse to explore the desolation of rural queerness and mental illness. The series stirred many people, but there were also questions of whether it was too invasive, of the ethics of using the intimate details of a person's life as a vehicle for a public message.

Like "S-Town," "Diary of a Misfit" is at once dewy-eyed and diligent, capricious and capacious, empathetic and exacting. It's as richly textured as a pot of gumbo. As a work of autobiography, it's maximalist; subtitled "A Memoir and a Mystery," it certainly is both of those things, but it's also an assiduous family history, a decades-spanning community chronicle à la Sarah Broom's "The Yellow House," a coming-out narrative, a dive into Christian denominations, a wrestling with Southern heritage. To use a well-worn road metaphor, your mileage may vary.

Most moving is Parks's depiction of a queer lineage, her assertion of an ancestry of outcasts, a tapestry of fellow misfits into which the marginalized will always, for better or worse, fit. Our selves are so often an assemblage of the stories of those who came before.

Late in the book, Parks talks to a lesbian named Pam who met Roy in 1972, when she was in junior high. When Pam first saw Roy, she "went mute with wonder." She "hadn't been able to name the feeling back then, but she looked at Roy and knew they had something in common." She wanted to ask Roy, as so many of us have wanted to ask our own queer ancestors, "How is society going to treat me, growing up different?" Even in her 50s, Pam still yearned for an answer to that question.

"Pam didn't have a flag or a word yet," Parks writes. "She only had Roy." □

MICHELLE HART *is the author of the novel "We Do What We Do in the Dark."*

PHOTOGRAPH VIA CASEY PARKS

Bohemian Rhapsody

A biography of an outcast and icon makes a case for Kiki de Montparnasse as an artist in her own right.

By JOANNA SCUTTS

Kiki de Montparnasse in 1932.

WE OPEN JUST as Kiki de Montparnasse begins to sing. It's a scene narrated in the present tense, stitched together from a patchwork of memories — for who didn't leave a record of their time in 1920s Paris? Especially if they'd managed to elbow their way into the Jockey, with its sticky floors, graffitied walls and stiff cocktails, where Kiki — queen of the neighborhood — purred her nostalgic songs. If you could smell it, said one contemporary, her voice would be "garlic hitting a pan's hot butter and wine": pungent, irresistible and impossible to recapture once it's gone.

KIKI MAN RAY
Art, Love, and Rivalry in 1920s Paris
By Mark Braude
Illustrated. 304 pp. W.W. Norton. $30.

Mark Braude's exuberantly entertaining biography sets out to rebalance the much-told story of Left Bank Paris, in which Kiki — model, memoirist and muse — is usually cast as a bit player. He brings that milieu to life in all its grit and energy — but also the larger sociopolitical pressures that myopic mythmaking leaves out: the still-vivid trauma of World War I and the growing conservative backlash against everything the cosmopolitan city represented. Montparnasse, like Greenwich Village, was a carnival, a permitted inversion of the expected order, where, for a moment, society's outcasts could rule.

Kiki was one such outcast. Born Alice Prin in 1901 in a Burgundian village to an unmarried country girl, she was raised by her grandmother alongside five illegitimate cousins. Alice didn't hide or reject her origins. They forged her character: her charm, her wildness and, especially, her generosity. Even when she was singing for a few sous in a dive bar, she'd buy you a drink if you were short. But she didn't pine for country life. At 12, a lanky adolescent with tumbling black hair and a pointed nose, she was sent to live with her mother in Paris. In artsy, down-at-heel Montparnasse (then known simply as "the Quarter") she found her home, her people and her calling.

Alice was just 16 when a sculptor invited her to pose at his studio in a ramshackle alley where a slew of artists eked out a living — one of his neighbors, a Romanian named Constantin Brancusi, trapped and ate the chickens that wandered the street. She found the work fun, easy, lucrative and — despite the age-old association between modeling and sex work — perfectly safe. Her mother disagreed, marching into the artists' den to drag her daughter home. But Alice had found something she was good at, and broke off contact with her mother in order to keep doing it.

To gain steady work, she needed to meet more artists, and in order to do that, she would have to conquer the Café Rotonde. Located in the heart of the Quarter, the Rotonde had a huge terrace, a bohemian clientele and a strict pecking order. Alice worked hard to charm the proprietor and soon became a fixture, gaining entree to the studios of Jewish émigré artists like Modigliani, Chaïm Soutine and her good friend Moïse Kisling. Nicknamed Kiki — often a slang term for a prostitute — she grew assertive; people liked her jokes and her belligerence. When a waiter at another cafe insisted she dress more respectably, she shot back that "a cafe isn't a church" and besides, "All the American bitches come in without hats."

Ah, yes, the Americans — what would 1920s Paris be without them? Among the thousands flocking to the city was a "short, scrappy and swarthy" Philadelphia artist born Emmanuel Radnitzky, "a pure product of immigrant America" in both his ambition and taste for self-reinvention. Man Ray, as he styled himself, had first fallen in with a crowd of expat Europeans in New York who — under the banner of Dada — toyed with tossing out the whole edifice of art, society, culture and its accompanying rules. In 1921, he followed his friend Marcel Duchamp to Paris, only to discover that all anyone wanted to talk about was America. He'd deliberately left America behind, along with his given name and his first wife, a Belgian poet who went by Adon Lacroix. When they separated, he beat her with a belt, telling her "to explain the marks to her lover." Although Braude doesn't dwell on the incident, it gives a horrifying glimpse of Man Ray's vicious temper, and his dehumanizing attitude toward the women with whom he was intimate.

Kiki and Man Ray met, as everyone did, at a cafe. They slept together during their second photo session and soon after that began sharing a tiny studio down the block from the Rotonde. At first, Kiki fulfilled the traditional role of artist's companion, acting as muse, cheerleader, secretary and housekeeper; she entertained with a spirit of abundance that belied their lack of money. In return, Man Ray refused to say he loved her, holding to the idea that "a romantic relationship was a kind of war." He was also at war with his own talent, desperate to be hailed as the great painter he wasn't, rather than the great photographer he was. Despite disparaging the work, he made a good living as a portrait photographer. And in the Quarter, "everyone led to someone else": Francis Picabia to Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, James Joyce.

More than anyone, Man Ray photographed Kiki. The most famous image they made together is both silly and stunning: Kiki's naked back and buttocks, her limbs folded in and turbaned head in profile, a violin's f-holes overlaid on her skin. Braude strains at some length to unfurl a meaning commensurate with the photograph's status as the most expensive ever sold at auction. It's "a picture of life," he suggests, marking a final break with the war, or perhaps "a fantasist's prelude to the inevitable disappointment of reality." More simply, it's a knowing joke about the role of the model, and the vexed question of her collaboration with her artist-lover. Can she be a musician, or only ever an instrument?

For all its liveliness, this attempt at restoring Kiki to prominence does not quite succeed at making her memorable as an artist. Braude describes her as a talented, if uncommitted, painter, a realist among the Surrealists, whose art and temperament were rooted in tangible pleasures rather than abstract ideas. "The sunny skies pulse with a blue you could fly into," he writes of her paintings, which depict the rural scenes and characters of her childhood. Like Man Ray, she was interested in film, and appeared onscreen — credited as "Kiki Ray" or "Kiki Man Ray" — in experimental works including Fernand Léger's 1924 "Ballet Mécanique."

But most of all, night after night and year after year, Kiki performed live, in cafes and bars around the Quarter, her natural shyness at war with her love of singing, until alcohol and cocaine brokered the peace. Everyone remembered her, but with the exception of a few minutes on tape and film, and in innumerable works of art as a model, her presence is evanescent. What Kiki created did not accrue in value and status like the works of her peers. As Braude observes, markets and museums shape artistic legacies — and you can't auction charisma. □

JOANNA SCUTTS'S *most recent book is "Hotbed: Bohemian Greenwich Village and the Secret Club That Sparked Modern Feminism."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY HERBERT HOFFMANN/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Living Arrangements

The intertwined daily dramas of tenants in a Midwestern apartment building.

By LEAH GREENBLATT

THE RABBIT HUTCH
By Tess Gunty
338 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $28.

SARA ANDREASSON

IT'S ALL WRITERS' PREROGATIVE to kill their darlings, though it takes a certain élan to kill your actual protagonist on the first page — or at least send her sliding somewhere beyond this mortal plane, as Tess Gunty seems to in the opening of "The Rabbit Hutch": "On a hot night in Apartment C4, Blandine Watkins exits her body. She is only 18 years old, but she has spent most of her life wishing for this to happen."

It's one of many bold moves in Gunty's dense, prismatic and often mesmerizing debut, a novel of impressive scope and specificity that falters mostly when it works too hard to wedge its storytelling into some broader notion of Big Ideas. The parameters of the story itself are confined almost entirely to a single summer week in the fictional Midwestern city of Vacca Vale, Ind. — one of those dying third-rate metropolises, whose tenuous grip on prosperity faded when its main industry, Zorn Automobiles, collapsed under a cloud of debt and ecological misdeeds several decades before.

Blandine is a child of Vacca Vale born and raised, if rarely cared for: an autodidact and eerie Valkyrie beauty, with her piles of well-thumbed tomes on 12th-century mystics and corn-silk halo of hair. There was a mother once, we are told in a few deftly sketched sentences, with a fateful oxycodone habit, and a father in jail; then a series of foster families. Now she works at a local diner heavy on avant-garde pie — flavors of the day include lavender lamb and banana charcoal — and shares a shabby apartment with three other aged-out foster kids, all troubled varieties of teenage boy.

It's their building that the book takes its title from: Originally designed to house Zorn laborers and christened La Lapinière in an act of misplaced faith and European flair, it's now a run-down complex that no one ever really refers to as anything other than the Rabbit Hutch. The walls there "are so thin, you can hear everyone's lives progress like radio plays," and Gunty passes through them with a God's eye, dipping in and out of units like C12, where a 60-something widower furtively checks his ratings on a dating website, and C10, where an aspiring influencer vamps, ready for his close-up. An elderly couple in C6 play out age-old patterns of low-level domestic strife in a cigarette-smogged living room while Hope, the fragile young mother in C8 struggling to bond with her newborn, finds comfort in reruns of a golden-age sitcom called "Meet the Neighbors."

The death of the show's former star, an apple-faced American sweetheart named Elsie Blitz, comes as hard news to Hope, though it allows the book to leap to Malibu, where adult Elsie reigned for decades as a passionate benefactor of the endangered three-toed pygmy sloth, and a far less devoted parent to her only child, Moses Robert Blitz. Elsie is a familiar archetype but a well-drawn one: the perfect Hollywood monster, so blithely dedicated to pleasure-seeking and stunted by fame that she's raised a son whose entire persona, even in his early 50s, is shaped around hating her.

It will take a series of events incited by another Hutch resident, Joan Kowalski, to summon him to Vacca Vale, though Joan is hardly the kind of siren to lure a man and leave him smashed on the rocks of desire. At 40, "she has the posture of a question mark, a stock face and a pair of 19th-century eyeglasses. Her solitude is as prominent as the cross around her neck." But she does work for an online obituary portal whose virtual memorial wall for Elsie provides the itchy, furious Moses with an outlet for the volcanic emotions he would never acknowledge as grief, and a reason to skip out on the funeral of the mother whose headlong narcissism left so little room for him.

His own quirks are numerous, and Gunty, who lives in Los Angeles, sets them cleverly against the self-regarding follies of show business and coastal elitism: the Olympic-level virtue signaling of guests at an art-world cocktail party; the looser mores of the Me Decade artists and libertines who once swirled around Elsie in her prime. ("Adoration and hatred — the only energies she knew how to dispense and accept.") To Moses, Vacca Vale is little more than a Midwestern emptiness to project himself upon, "a wasteland of factories, construction and dead grass on Google Maps." To Blandine, though, it's a place of almost totemic weight — the only home she's ever known, and one she's determined to defend against an influx of local developers who equate prosperity with new-built condos, not trees and parks.

The diner serves avant-garde pie — flavors include lavender lamb and banana charcoal.

Her elaborate effort to sabotage those civic schemes becomes one of the novel's less resonant threads, a stylistic outlier whose endgame never quite syncs up with the larger story. More germane, and more interesting, is how a girl capable of delivering vast soliloquies on medieval saints and late-stage capitalism came to be a high school dropout serving weird pies. Blandine, it's eventually revealed, is not her birth name, and until fairly recently she was an academic standout, if not exactly a prom queen, at a local prep school pleased to take on a scholarship kid of her unusual I.Q. and sad back story.

Her reasons for leaving so abruptly before her senior year turn out to be a tale as old as time, or at least "Lolita" — though "The Rabbit Hutch" smartly reframes the depressing clichés of a vulnerable teenager and an older authority figure, in part by making them each so constantly aware of the roles they're playing. One of the pleasures of the narrative is the way it luxuriates in language, all the rhythms and repetitions and seashell whorls of meaning to be extracted from the dull casings of everyday life. Gunty's writing is so rich with texture and subtext it can sometimes tip over into the too-muchness of a decadent meal or a Paul Thomas Anderson film. As with many new novelists, and a lot of veteran ones too, her longer monologues tend to come off less like the cadences of ordinary speech than the workshopped thoughts of a star student, placed between quotation marks. (Gunty earned an M.F.A. in creative writing from N.Y.U.)

But she also has a way of pressing her thumb on the frailty and absurdity of being a person in the world; all the soft, secret needs and strange intimacies. The book's best sentences — and there are heaps to choose from — ping with that recognition, even in the ordinary details: A social worker has "sunglasses that evoked particularly American things, like goatees and drive-through banks and NASCAR"; high school bathrooms "resemble bomb shelters: windowless constructions of cinder blocks painted the color of sharks." Looming over all that, the fate of her body in the balance, is Blandine. For all her extraterrestrial prettiness and spooky, precocious gifts, she's still a teenager — in some sense not fully cooked yet, if she'll ever get to be. (It's hard not to picture the actress Anya Taylor-Joy, should there ever be a casting call.) "The Rabbit Hutch"'s vibrant, messy sprawl can seem that way too, but its excesses also feel generous: defiant in the face of death, metaphysical exits or whatever comes next. □

LEAH GREENBLATT *is a critic at large at Entertainment Weekly.*

Who Is Vladimir Putin?

This is an impressive biography, though it lacks the final chapters that will define the Russian leader's place in history.

By PETER BAKER

IN THE DAYS after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Moscow suddenly felt different. My wife and I, serving there as correspondents, were overwhelmed by expressions of sympathy and solidarity. Russians we had never met faxed condolence letters. A teary-eyed stranger stopped me on the street brandishing a picture of herself at the World Trade Center from a trip years earlier. The outside of the American Embassy was carpeted with flowers, icons, crosses, candles and a note that said, "We were together at the Elbe, we will be together again."

A young master of the Kremlin named Vladimir Putin seemed to take that to heart, pledging steadfast support for the United States. For a heady moment, it seemed as if the planet's two dominant nuclear powers would rekindle the World War II alliance that led Russian and American troops to meet at Germany's Elbe River in 1945. But now as then, it would not last. The sense of good will soon evaporated, and the illusion that Putin was a Western-oriented modernizer was shattered. Two decades later, Russia and America are facing off in a twilight struggle in Ukraine arguably as dangerous as the Cold War that followed the defeat of the Nazis.

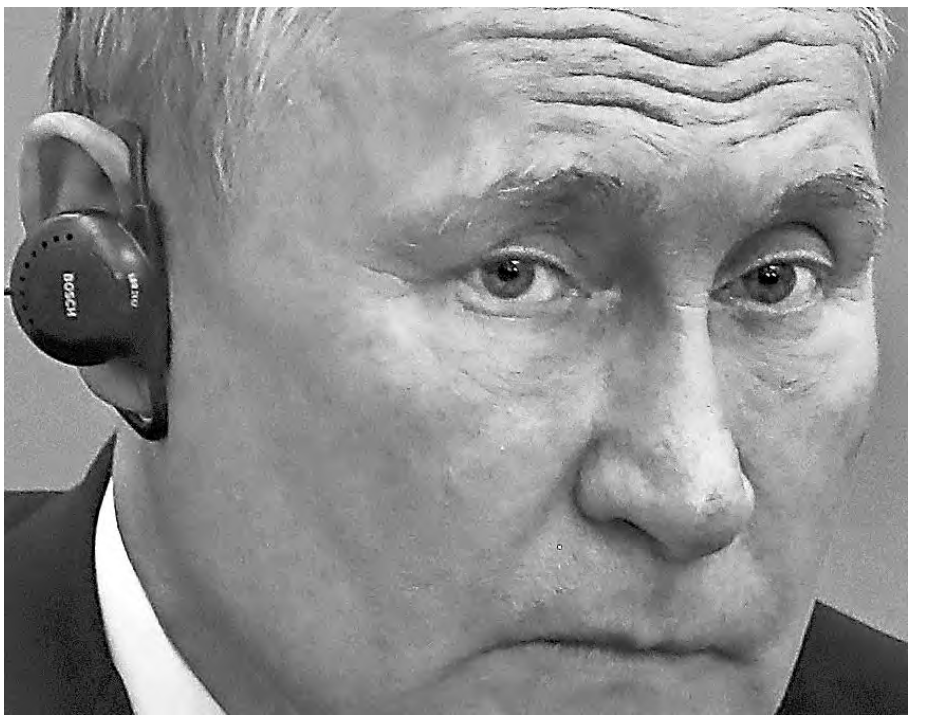
Was that Putin's fault or ours? Did we misjudge him or did we mislead him? Was it inevitable that Putin would come to see himself as a latter-day Peter the Great seeking to re-establish the czarist empire or could we have done more to anchor a post-Soviet Russia in the community of nations? Never have those questions been more profoundly relevant. Now weighing into the debate is the British journalist Philip Short, with his expansive new biography, "Putin," which sees the rift between East and West largely through the eyes of its protagonist.

Short's account is both perfectly and unfortunately timed, arriving just when we most need to understand Putin, yet missing the chapter that may yet define his place in history. The invasion of Ukraine does not take place until Page 656 of a 672-page text, having erupted just as Short was completing eight years of research and composition. Such is the peril of writing biographies of figures who are still alive and not finished writing their own stories.

PUTIN
By Philip Short
Illustrated. 864 pp. Henry Holt & Company. $40.

PETER BAKER *is The Times's chief White House correspondent and has covered the last five presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He is the author of seven books, most recently "The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021," with Susan Glasser, to be published in September.*

But if the story is unavoidably incomplete, Short's version nonetheless offers a compelling, impressive and methodically researched account of Putin's life so far. He plumbs an array of sources, including his own interviews, to reconstruct the tale of a street brawler from a bleak communal apartment in postwar Leningrad who embarks on a mediocre career as a midlevel K.G.B. officer in East Germany only to make a stunning leap to power in Moscow following the chaos of 1990s post-Soviet Russia.



Vladimir Putin, July 20, 2022.

Short, a former journalist with the BBC, The Economist and The Times of London, adds to the library of insightful books about the Russian autocrat, including "The New Tsar," by Steven Lee Myers; "Mr. Putin," by Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy; "The Man Without a Face," by Masha Gessen; and "Putin's World," by Angela Stent. But unlike those Russia specialists, he comes to his subject as a chronicler of some of history's biggest villains, having written biographies of Pol Pot and Mao Zedong.

As critics observed about those volumes, Short's determination to present a fully realized portrait of Putin may strike some as excessively sympathetic. "The purpose of this book is neither to demonize Putin — he is more than capable of doing that himself — nor to absolve him of his crimes," Short writes, "but to explore his personality, to understand what motivates him and how he has become the leader that he is."

In fact, he does absolve Putin of several crimes. Short opens with an extended examination of the never-solved apartment bombings of 1999 that were blamed on Chechen terrorists but suspected of being a government conspiracy to cement Putin's path to power. Short exonerates Putin. He may be right; no one has ever definitively proved the case. But it is a curious way to start a book about an autocrat who is currently bombing plenty of other apartments in Ukraine. He likewise absolves Putin of notorious political attacks against the likes of Sergei Skripal, Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov, while allowing that he probably was responsible for the gruesome poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London.

YET SHORT'S BOOK is no hagiography. He extensively covers the dark moments of Putin's career — the leveling of Grozny during the second Chechen war, the reckless handling of the Moscow theater siege, the cynical exploitation of the terrorist attack on a school in Beslan to consolidate power, the crackdown on dissent at home, including the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei A. Navalny. The Putin of Short's book is not someone you would invite to dinner; he is crude and cold, arrogant and heartless. He is unmoved when his wife is in a serious car accident or when his dog is run over. His wife, a believer in astrology, once said he must have been born under the sign of the vampire. She is now, not surprisingly, his ex-wife.

There are small errors — Short writes, for example, that Start II was "still unratified by the U.S. Congress" in 2010 when in fact the treaty was ratified in 1996 — but these invariably slip into any work of this size and scope. More debatable may be some of his conclusions in which he adopts the Russian view. He equates Putin's forcible annexation of Crimea to Western support for Kosovo's independence, dismissing differences between the two as "nuances." Indeed, Kosovo is one of "the West's three cardinal sins" in Putin's eyes "that had destroyed both sides' hopes of building a better, more peaceful world after the collapse of the Soviet Union" (along with withdrawing from the Antiballistic Missile treaty and expanding NATO). Every Russian outrage is likened to some Western perfidy. Yes, the Russians interfered in the 2016 election but "the United States had done the same." The deterioration in relations had a certain "inevitability" that was "largely the result of a series of Western, essentially American, decisions."

Short advances the Russian argument that America betrayed a "promise" by Secretary of State James A. Baker III in 1990 that NATO jurisdiction would not move "one inch to the east." In fact, there was no promise. Baker floated the idea during negotiations over reunification of Germany but later walked it back, and no such commitment was included in the resulting treaty that did extend NATO to East Germany with Moscow's assent. By contrast, Short makes no mention of an actual promise Russia made in a 1994 agreement guaranteeing Ukraine's sovereignty and forswearing the use of force against it, an accord Putin has obviously broken.

Indeed, Short accepts Putin's explanation for his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. "The State Department," he writes, "insisted that the war had nothing to do with NATO enlargement and everything to do with Putin's refusal to accept Ukraine's existence as an independent state, which may have been good spin but was poor history." Unless you read Putin's own 5,000-word poor history published last year refusing to accept Ukraine's existence as an independent state or remember that the invasion took place many, many years after the main NATO expansion and at a time when NATO membership for Ukraine was not seriously on the table.

It may be that all this was inevitable. It may be that the moments of Russian-American friendship were all exceptions to a generational struggle destined to be waged for decades to come. Putin seems to think so. Short recounts Putin's memory of his meeting with Vice President Joe Biden in 2011.

"Don't be under any illusion," he told the future president. "We only look like you. . . . Russians and Americans resemble each other physically. But inside we have very different values." Certainly, Biden would agree with that today. □

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARASH KHAMOOSHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Pregnant Pause

A novel unravels the limitless ironies of maternity.

By LAUREN OYLER

BLAME IT ON social media, on synoptic attention spans, whatever: The speculative conceit reigns in contemporary publishing, where few novels live up to their promise of revelatory social commentary. But a particularly good one can still tempt even the most cynical of readers. In the Japanese author Emi Yagi's prizewinning debut, "Diary of a Void," a single woman in her mid-30s, frustrated by her stupefying job at a company that manufactures cardboard cores for paper products, spontaneously decides to feign pregnancy in order to get out of menial tasks like making coffee and cleaning up after meetings — the stench of unappreciated labor aggravates her morning sickness. Over the course of the novel, she carries the lie to term.

DIARY OF A VOID
By Emi Yagi
Translated by David Boyd and Lucy North
213 pp. Viking. $23.

"So this is pregnancy," the narrator, known only by her last name, Shibata, thinks as the unexpected perks of pregnancy start accumulating. "What luxury. What loneliness."

American readers, living in one of six countries in the world that don't guarantee some form of paid parental leave, may find the notion that pregnancy can be a "luxury" less familiar than would a reader in Japan, whose Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare issues a pamphlet, a "diary," in which expectant mothers can track their pregnancy and childbirth.

Once Shibata "conceives," she is permitted, no questions asked, to leave work at 5 p.m. every day and take a yearlong maternity leave (though the lack of overtime pay does cut into her budget). Encouraged by one of several invasive male co-workers to "do her very best to take care of herself," she uses her new free time to hit up the grocery store before all the produce is picked over, cook herself elaborate, healthy meals and join "Mommy Aerobics" classes. (Her new lifestyle has led her to gain weight, and of course she's conflicted: Plumpness, plus strategic shirt stuffing, helps her maintain the ruse.)

But a woman's loneliness transcends national politics. It's not only the lie that isolates Shibata from those around her — there are few friends or relatives in this short novel — but also the experience of being even hypothetically pregnant. Her male co-workers treat her with "deference," and they're also super annoying. "You're finally getting into the spirit," her desk neighbor comments when he sees the subway-appropriate maternity badge on Shibata's bag one morning. The nosiest and most "helpful" of her colleagues, he has a feeling she's carrying a boy, a prediction she makes come true later in the book.

If occasionally heavy-handed — an encounter with a stained-glass window depicting the Virgin Mary could have been more elusive — Yagi has a light touch for the endless ironies made possible by her premise. There is humor ("since I got pregnant" becomes a delightful refrain), but also the realization that the alienation of pregnancy and motherhood is no reprieve from the oppressive office culture that inspires Shibata's experiment.

However, while the external pressures on Shibata's body might ally her with actually pregnant people, her attempts to bond with them go nowhere, and not just because she can't relate to what they're going through physically. When an acquaintance from aerobics expresses anguish over her unhelpful husband, Shibata replies that she doesn't understand. "I'm always so alone," the narrator says. "That's the way it is from the moment we come into this world, but I'm still not used to it — how alone we all are."

EMMA ERICKSON

As the lie starts to become surreal, palpable abdominal kicking and an apparently legitimate sonogram briefly make the reader think that maybe our narrator has actually been tricking us, or herself, all along. The novel's conclusion is thankfully less pat: In the end we're left with nothing but the void, "just big enough for one person." □

LAUREN OYLER *is the author of "Fake Accounts."*

Head Hunters

A corporate assassin isn't far from a corporate automaton.

CAROLINE GAMON

By IAN WANG

THE KILLINGS THAT take place in "Three Assassins" — and there are many — are disarmingly mundane. Kotaro Isaka describes murder the way a doctor would a surgery: meticulous, but numbly pragmatic. He fixates on the pulpy, tangible procedure of death, the blood, spittle, clatter of knife point against bone. The novel's central enigma, the Pusher, is defined by his method of pushing his victims in front of moving cars and then vanishing, making the scene look like an accident. But a method quickly becomes a routine, which becomes a straitjacket. And when your clients are a rogues' gallery of conniving politicians and wealthy dirtbags, a corporate assassin isn't far from a corporate automaton.

THREE ASSASSINS
By Kotaro Isaka
Translated by Sam Malissa
266 pp. The Overlook Press. $27.

This deadening realization haunts Isaka's three protagonists: the other two assassins, Cicada and the Whale, but also Suzuki, the novel's everyman, whose quest to avenge his wife's murder is stymied when the Pusher gets to her killer — a billionaire C.E.O.'s "idiot son" with a penchant for drunken hit-and-runs — first. Suzuki tails the Pusher, unaware that Cicada and the Whale are on his tail, too.

Suzuki, a bumbling former schoolteacher, makes for a perfect foil to these trained killers. But Isaka sends them all tumbling into the gutter of Tokyo's disempowered criminal underworld. Cicada, who specializes in whole-family assassinations, lives under the thumb of a domineering handler. The Whale, who forces his targets to commit suicide, is tormented by the ghosts of his former victims. And Suzuki finds it increasingly difficult to justify his amoral actions in the name of a vengeance he can't even achieve. All three men have their own reasons for searching for the Pusher, but what really eludes them is a sense of control over their own lives.

Some of these names may sound familiar to readers of Isaka's "Bullet Train," which follows another cast of hit men carrying out separate missions on one Shinkansen train, and takes place after the action of "Three Assassins." With its cavalcade of characters and dense, claustrophobic setting, "Bullet Train" steams forward with the frenetic chaos of a Scooby-Doo chase sequence. By contrast, "Three Assassins" is a sparser, sourer thriller, its slow pursuit distending across Tokyo and leaving plenty of time for dread. On one job, the Whale — who reads "Crime and Punishment" over and over — asks himself: "Has anyone actually ever done anything for themselves? Can they even? As soon as they understand the impossibility of it, they want to die."

In the delicate balancing act between this heady nihilism and his direct, propulsive plotting, Isaka occasionally fumbles. Moments that verge on existential epiphany ("people simply live, with no goal, no destination. They live like they're dead") or wry political critique ("fascism never looks like fascism") are stunted by Isaka's flat prose, and by Sam Malissa's sometimes too-colloquial translation (it might be the only time you read a hired assassin address someone as "my dude").

The novel is most successful when it marries its depressive elements with the hallucinatory. When Cicada meets the Whale, he is consumed by a sudden, preternatural melancholy, "saturated with black fluid" as a "gelatinous sorrow spreads through his chest, then his head." Unable to remember anything before meeting his handler, Cicada asks aloud: "Do I even exist?" Does anyone in this eerie novel — littered with apparitions, made-up songs and films and professional actors posing as ordinary people? A surrealist fable disguised as a crime novel, "Three Assassins" feels like a fever dream that makes sense when you're in it, but whose strange contours linger long after you wake up. □

IAN WANG *is a writer and critic whose work has appeared in The Baffler, Sight & Sound and Hyperallergic.*

Wicked

In this novel, witchcraft is a power, a curse and a potent metaphor.

By TOCHI ONYEBUCHI

IN THE WORLD of "The Women Could Fly," Megan Giddings's second novel, the government mandates that women marry by age 30; by age 28, unmarried women must enroll in a registry. Those who resist should gear up for a future post-carceral in its complexion. The justification? Women are uniquely capable of witchcraft. What in another world might be called miracles are, here, baleful strangenesses. More quotidian phenomena are attributed to women and witchcraft too. If you've come down with a fever that won't go away, a witch did it. If your husband cheats on you, a witch made him do it. "Witch" is an epithet, and witches are still burned at the stake, women a danger to be corralled.

THE WOMEN COULD FLY
By Megan Giddings
283 pp. Amistad. $26.99.

TOCHI ONYEBUCHI *is the author of "Riot Baby" and, most recently, "Goliath."*

Josephine "Jo" Thomas begins the novel on the cusp of turning 28 and struggling to move past her mother's disappearance 14 years earlier. The accusation of witchcraft hangs over the family. After an investigation by the Bureau of Witchcraft, suspicion endures. "If your mother was a witch, well, the odds are much higher that you are too." One day Jo's father finds an updated copy of his wife's will. To recover the financial inheritance her mother left, Jo must travel to an island that appears every seven years in Lake Superior before retreating into the unknown. The date of its next emergence is in four days, so Jo journeys there in hopes of finding out just what happened to her mother.

What Jo encounters on the island is a phantasmagoria of female empowerment and an education, both academic and emotional, in magic at the hands of a young woman named Linden, whom Jo comes to love. But having solved the mystery of her mother, Jo chooses to return to her responsibilities in the terrestrial, persecutory world where magic is a curse word.

For a piece of speculative fiction to succeed, the foundational abnormality must feel present and lived in. Not scaffolding, but substructure. Yet for a good portion of this book, the actual witchery falls away. The island section of the book is thrilling, but with Jo's return to her old life, the speculative elements of the novel's world-building retreat, like the island itself, to the realm of hearsay and rumor. We are left with a gendered McCarthyism.

TARA ANAND

In a flashback, Jo's mother tells Jo the tale of a witch whose powers greatly benefited the village where she lived. But an attempt at helping neighboring villagers results in catastrophe. The lesson: "The only safe place for a woman is 100 percent alone." Jo has spent much of her life infected by the omnidirectional mistrust in that statement, but her time on the island proves just how mistaken her mother was.

Toward the end of the novel, Jo reunites briefly, tragically, with Linden and "all the magic that had been building inside me felt alive." It is the novel's strongest moment, the metaphor made flesh: women not as danger but as power.

Sometimes, the idea of timeliness can sit like a curtain over a novel, both emphasizing and obscuring the work itself. "Timeliness" can infuse a book with greater personal and social resonance, but it can also hollow out a novel, encouraging readers to see "issue" rather than "story."

It can be tempting to read "The Women Could Fly," which comes in the shadow of the recent Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, and call the book timely. But the relationship at the heart of this novel — between Jo and her mercurial mother — is much closer to timeless. □

Femme Fatale

The narrator of this novel obsesses over a distant acquaintance who killed her two infant children.

By CATHERINE LACEY

MIDWAY THROUGH "Mothers Don't," by the Basque author Katixa Agirre, two mothers, the unnamed narrator and her college friend Léa, go out to get drunk and eat oysters. On the surface it's a standard mothers' night out — sundresses, scandalous confessions and the relief of escaping the domestic — but the evening is haunted by their former friend Alice, who is on trial for killing her twin infants.

Katie Whittemore's translation from the Spanish reveals darkly elegant prose throughout. When Alice's au pair discovers the murders, "the duvet covered them almost completely," the narrator says. "The twins. Their eyes were closed. Beside the bed, in an armchair upholstered in striped fabric, sat Alice Espanet, the mother, dressed in a nightgown. One of her breasts was exposed. The left." The call for an ambulance "was recorded and that's how we know it lasted two minutes, that there were some challenges with communication, sighs, wailing, disbelief. To all appearances, Alice Espanet kept her composure for the duration of the call. She didn't move from the armchair, or cover her left breast."

MOTHERS DON'T
By Katixa Agirre
Translated by Katie Whittemore
161 pp. Open Letter. Paper, $15.95.

CATHERINE LACEY *is the author, most recently, of "Pew."*

The narrator, still brutalized by the difficult delivery of her son, slips in and out of view (a motherly quality) as she tries to write a novel about infanticide — a book that, like this one, blends a fictional plot with historical precedents. "How could I possibly stylize violence perpetrated against children," she wonders. She does so in part by interrogating other myths and stories of women killing their children, themselves, or being accused of being bad mothers, from Euripides' Medea to Sylvia Plath to Lindy Chamberlain.

More broadly, the novel is concerned with the way patriarchal cultures pass judgment on women at large. After the narrator steps onstage to accept an award for her last book, "plenty of Twitter comments were made about my appearance, along with suggestions that I'd only gotten the award because I was a girl." Both the prosecution and the defense in Alice's trial try to use feminism to legitimize their position. "A mother can be cruel," the prosecution argues in an attempt to portray Alice as a criminal, not insane. "To think otherwise is to cave to an outdated view of motherhood and femininity."

Even our narrator tries, fruitlessly, to comprehend something essential about Alice, using her oyster date to interview Léa about Alice's childhood as a bulimic and a pathological liar, recounted while each "gluey, formless mollusk" is consumed. She later retches them back up on the banks of a river. Novels about the darkest possibilities of motherhood, gestation and postpartum recovery are easily filled to the brim with all manner of excreta (ripped flesh, raw nipples, blood), and this one is no exception. The sustained attention given to the consumption and regurgitation of the raw oysters — eaten while they are still alive and just as defenseless outside the shell as a fetus is outside the womb — stitches together several of Agirre's themes.

"Murder is — at most — something men perpetrate against their partners or exes," Whittemore translates, yet the cases that "inspire so much curiosity, so many clicks, such high ratings" are often the ones committed by women. Agirre's novel makes the case that the very idea of the bad or even indifferent mother (a type that naturally includes women who don't want to be mothers at all) elicits a highly emotional and illogical response in our culture. Inventive in form and fearless in style, this novel makes plain how insufficient a courtroom is to hold the complexity of psychology. Agirre has given us a deeply unsettling exploration of what a mother or a woman can or cannot, should or should not do — a topic both timeless and all too timely. □

Katixa Agirre

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZALOA FUERTES

The Wanderers

Segundo Villanueva, a quixotic spiritual seeker, led hundreds of followers from Peru to Israel.

By KAT ROSENFIELD

THE WORDS "PERU" and "spiritual journey" have taken on certain connotations in the era of hallucinogenic tourism. But decades before the Amazon became a destination for disaffected millennials to confront their demons on all-inclusive plant medicine retreats, it was a place to test one's faith — and the site of one man's all-consuming search for understanding, for truth and, eventually, for salvation in a holy land halfway around the world.

The story *is* about faith, but more than that, it is about questioning. The man at its center, Segundo Villanueva, spent a lifetime in study, reading and arguing about the Bible, forever hoping to discern the authentic voice of God. His desire to uncover the truth — a truth that he believed had been obscured by centuries of misinterpretation and guarded by worldly, corrupt men of the cloth — is in some ways reminiscent of the cultural conspiracies that roil our contemporary politics. Where knowledge seems to be hidden, men will drive themselves mad trying to find it.

THE PROPHET OF THE ANDES
An Unlikely Journey to the Promised Land
By Graciela Mochkofsky
Translated by Lisa Dillman
272 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.

Graciela Mochkofsky first stumbled across references to Villanueva in 2003. "After many years of suffering and persecution," Mochkofsky writes in the introduction, "Villanueva had amassed hundreds of followers who considered him a prophet. They all converted to Judaism and migrated to Israel." Her book both documents and contextualizes Villanueva's spiritual journey against the backdrop of Peru's religious and political history.

As she was to learn, the truth about Villanueva was dark and complicated. He was 21 when he found a Bible hidden deep in a trunk that belonged to his late father — and, in its pages, found himself. Miraculous though it was, the land of Canaan sounded familiar to Villanueva, "full of donkeys and goats, roast lamb, udders and milk, crops harvested or ruined. The people there concocted the same petty schemes, found themselves in the same absurd predicaments."

A self-taught biblical scholar, Villanueva was endlessly intrigued by the moral road map of the Bible, and frustrated by the contradictions he saw between its straightforward commandments and the practices of the Catholic Church he knew. The book depicts a sort of spiritual adolescence, a trying-on of identities: Catholic, Calvinist, Pentecostal, Adventist. At every turn, Villanueva was a thorn in the side of priests and preachers, who were initially impressed then increasingly irritated by his relentless questioning. What did God want of them? Should they become vegetarians? Change their names? When the Bible commanded circumcision, was that a metaphorical edict or a *literal* one?

The Andes seen from the road near Coyllurqui, Peru.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOMAS MUNITA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Villanueva's thirst — for guidance, for structure, for the knowledge and freedom to follow God's true path — inspired him to found his own church in the Amazon (where he was shot and nearly killed by a local guide). But his great epiphany came in the late 1960s, when a quest to read the Bible in the original Hebrew led him to Lima's small, closely guarded Jewish community. The rabbi presented him with a children's book titled "Jewish Traditions and Customs," intended to discourage Villanueva from any notion of converting: "The book would make clear who was Jewish and who was not, why a highland Peruvian, a *cholo,* was not, and *could not* be, Jewish," Mochkofsky writes.

But when Villanueva opened the book, what he found was a revelation. It described precisely the way he and his followers were already living, and he arrived home delighted, the mystery solved at last. Guess what, he told his congregation: They were Jewish! They'd been Jews all along!

The nature of Jewish identity has become no less fraught since then. Is it a matter of bloodlines? Tradition? Observance? Faith? But Villanueva was neither aware of nor interested in religious gatekeeping, and this book is strongest — and most human — in these moments when he barrels forward, certain that he's finally figured it all out. In one memorable scene, Villanueva and his congregation return to the rabbi in search of circumcision (not the metaphorical kind) but are turned away; their only other option is a surgeon who will perform the procedure for the hefty sum of $60 apiece. One imagines that many men would simply (and perhaps relievedly) abandon the enterprise at this point, but Villanueva would not be deterred: Three years later, he and a dozen followers were back with cash in hand.

This story is sprawling, multigenerational, the stuff of a Cecil B. DeMille epic.

But these moments are few and far between. This story is sprawling, multigenerational, the stuff of a Cecil B. DeMille epic; its settings range from dirt roads high in the mountains where the air is too thin to breathe to fecund rainforests to the war-torn West Bank, where Villanueva and his congregation ultimately settle. And like any epic, it often lacks intimacy; we get to know Villanueva as a student, a teacher and a prophet, but not so much as a father, a husband or a man. Mochkofsky is no doubt aware of this; an endnote laments the "preponderance of male voices in this book," a hazard of the decision to focus her narrative on the part of Villanueva's life and community that largely excluded women. Even more unfortunate is that Villanueva's voice is not among those featured. By the time Mochkofsky connected with him in 2005, he was in the late stages of Alzheimer's disease; the afterword notes regretfully that "our awkward exchange could not be described as an interview." And Mochkofsky's text, originally written in Spanish, seems to have lost lyricism in the sometimes awkward translation.

The most notable exclusion, however, is not a person, but an event: Here is a story of Jewish faith in which the Holocaust plays no part whatsoever. It is, Mochkofsky writes, "a Judaism with no past and no tradition, with no memory of persecution, the Holocaust or the struggles for Zionism" — and yet the narrative of displacement is no less compelling for it. The Peruvian converts were fleeing not persecution or pogroms but abject poverty, fueled by government corruption. When emissaries from Israel visited Villanueva's congregation, they were aghast at the barrenness of the place: dirt floors, no plumbing, a windowless, roofless temple lit by candles. Israel was no less of a beacon to these newly minted Jews. They, too, bore a brutal legacy: of colonialism, the Spanish arriving in Peru to conquer, to kill and to convert the local population by force.

Many of Villanueva's followers remain in Israel today, but Villanueva did not find peace there. The rabbis, it turned out, were as fallible as any other leaders, prone to conflicting interpretations of the Torah. His insistence on continuing to ask questions made Villanueva a nuisance there as he had always been, everywhere. And so this is, ultimately, a story of a journey without a destination — and Villanueva less a messianic or prophetic figure than a tragic one. A restless, homeless, helpless searcher who seeks endlessly without finding, sows continually without reaping, and dies with his mind, and his memory, in tatters. In the Old Testament, this is Cain's fate; in Coleridge, the Ancient Mariner's. But when we encounter this man in folklore, he's known by another, more familiar name: the Wandering Jew. □

KAT ROSENFIELD *is a culture writer, a columnist at Unherd and the author of four novels, including the Edgar-nominated "No One Will Miss Her." Her next book, "You Must Remember This," will be published in January.*

Game Face

A Thai American girl wrestles with anti-Asian racism while auditioning for the cheerleading squad.

By JENNIFER MATHIEU

THE PERILS OF early adolescence are often depicted in broad strokes. The Bully. The Crush. The Zit. But in reality these tender years are much more nuanced. Childhood friendships slowly begin to outgrow themselves and change. Cracks begin to emerge in our once-infallible parents, revealing them to be flawed human beings. Questions of self-identity percolate to the surface, demanding answers.

THE TRYOUT
By Christina Soontornvat
Illustrated by Joanna Cacao
272 pp. Graphix. Cloth, $24.99; Paper, $12.99.
(Ages 8 to 12)

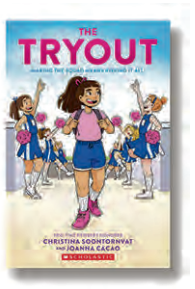
Christina Soontornvat and Joanna Cacao's delightful graphic novel, "The Tryout," portrays this version of middle school, and while there is a bully to be found in its pages, even he is afforded some depth.

Set in the mid-1990s and based on Soontornvat's own small-town Texas childhood as the daughter of a Thai immigrant father and an American mother whose Texas roots run deep, "The Tryout" follows Christina as she adjusts to seventh grade. While the main narrative focuses on the experience of auditioning for her middle school's cheerleading squad, the plot functions as a foundation that allows Christina to explore the big questions that come with growing up.

For starters, who is Christina? Is she the Thai girl who sometimes attends Buddhist temple and brings noodles for lunch, receiving not-so-nice comments from her classmates? Or is she the American girl who sometimes goes to a Christian church and watches cheerleading competitions on television with her best friend? Rather than providing pat answers, Soontornvat's layered story wrestles with this tension through its vibrant setting, which includes the restaurant Christina's family runs. (In one of many subtle nods to the immigrant experience, Christina's father decides to forgo serving Thai food, choosing to appeal to the locals with American-style Chinese food and fortune cookies.)

While Christina's story zeroes in on her struggles as one of only a few Asian Americans in a small, mostly white Southern town, "The Tryout" also captures many of the universal pains of adolescence. An occasion when Christina makes fun of a classmate's outfit in an effort to fit in, then grapples with guilt later, is heartbreaking in its realness. Another of the book's broad and relatable themes is the changing nature of teenage friendships. Megan has been Christina's longtime, true-blue best friend, her ally against Tobin, the aforementioned bully, who frequently slings racist slurs in Christina's direction. As the daughter of an Iranian immigrant, she can also relate to Christina's feelings of being an outsider. But Megan has chosen another girl to partner with for the cheerleading tryouts, a crushing situation for Christina. When Christina gathers the courage to ask Megan why they can't be partners, Megan's answer reveals so much of what this book is really about: the longing to fit in and the fear of not belonging.

Cacao's illustrations are an excellent match for Soontornvat's rich text. Individual facial expressions somehow capture numerous emotions stirring simultaneously inside the adolescent characters. Among the book's most charming elements are brief visual bursts in which Christina, a lover of Tolkien and fantasy (presaging her future as the Newbery Honor-winning author of "A Wish in the Dark"), imagines a parallel life full of elves and horse-riding warrior princesses. Here Cacao's images truly shine.



The plot alone is enough to keep young readers flipping the pages. (I held my breath when the final roster of cheerleaders was announced.) But like all good books about growing pains, this captivating middle-grade gem contains many moments that will resonate with young and old alike. □

JENNIFER MATHIEU *is the author of "Bad Girls Never Say Die" and "Moxie."*

Soldiering On

A Chinese American boy and his family feel as if they're refighting the U.S. Civil War.

By SHING YIN KHOR

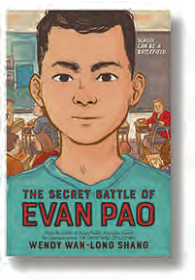
IN 1860, there were approximately 35,000 Chinese people in the United States, about 200 of whom lived in the Eastern part of the country. Of these, 50-60 would go on to fight in the American Civil War. Most were Union soldiers, but there were exceptions, like the two eldest sons of the famous conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker — Christopher Bunker, the son of Chang, and Stephen Bunker, the son of Eng, who were both enslavers (like their fathers) and Confederate soldiers.

THE SECRET BATTLE OF EVAN PAO
By Wendy Wan-Long Shang
272 pp. Scholastic. $17.99.
(Ages 8 to 12)

I have an existing interest in 19th-century Chinese American history, but I learned this fact the same way Evan Pao does, while Googling "'Chinese' and 'U.S. Civil War.'"

"The Secret Battle of Evan Pao," by Wendy Wan-Long Shang (winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for "The Great Wall of Lucy Wu"), is about a 12-year-old Chinese American boy, a newcomer to the mostly white town of Haddington, Va., who, in response to his teacher's suggestion that he be a "scribe" instead of a soldier on his school's annual "Battlefield Day," makes the discovery that there were Chinese soldiers in the Civil War. The novel points to the fallibility of an American education system that has — out of ignorance or malice, and often a potent combination of both — repressed the stories of marginalized people. This plays as a heady background to the emotional heart of the book: the quiet tension of a nonwhite family living in a white community that refuses to acknowledge their whole humanity, viewing them instead as curiosities or interlopers.

Evan simply wants to do what his friends are doing (which, to be fair, is dressing up as a losing army). This leads him to some complicated history. Librarians and educators will be relieved to hear that the book stresses the importance of primary sources. And Evan realizes that while the march toward knowledge is slow, prying every morsel of history from the claws of those who try to suppress it is well worth the effort.



While the novel is gentle in its assessment of white bullies in a mostly white town, spikes of righteous anger poke through. Evan's older sister, Celeste, is a lightning bolt of fury in reaction to the litany of unintended microaggressions toward the Pao family that are delivered at near-breakneck speed in the first few chapters. Targeted aggressions soon follow. Refreshingly, the Pao family is not interested in maintaining a quiet dignity in the face of these slings and arrows — the boy in Evan's class who shoots a bullet through their living room window, the useless cops who are more than willing to let white boys (who always get to be little boys) off the hook.

Expressions of interest can feel equally offensive. When a boy decides he has a crush on Celeste — "He *thinks* he likes me. Ugh. . . . I'm just some weird idea of being cool and exotic to him" — she sums up the unwanted attention this way: "A person who hates you without knowing you is the same as a person who likes you without knowing you."

"The Secret Battle of Evan Pao" is a thoughtful and nuanced novel, with relatable characters, that treats white complacency and complicity with forbearance, though it certainly doesn't excuse it. It's a middle-grade book, so the ending is necessarily tidy and perhaps not entirely earned, but the low simmer of anger about injustice continues after the reconciliations. The Pao family is still angry, and they deserve to be. □

SHING YIN KHOR'S *"The Legend of Auntie Po" won an Eisner Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award.*

Best Sellers

The New York Times

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nytimes.com/books/best-sellers

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 7-13

Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	173
2	2	**IT ENDS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	61
3	3	**VERITY,** by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series and uncovers a horrifying truth.	36
4	4	**UGLY LOVE,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Tate Collins and Miles Archer, an airline pilot, think they can handle a no strings attached arrangement. But they can't.	31
5	5	**THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	59
6	6	**NOVEMBER 9,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Is Ben using his relationship with Fallon as fodder for his novel?	21
7	11	**ALL YOUR PERFECTS,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Quinn and Graham's marriage depends on past promises.	8
8	8	**THE 6:20 MAN,** by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) When his ex-girlfriend turns up dead in his office building, an entry-level investment analyst delves into the halls of economic power.	5
9	12	**BOOK LOVERS,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) While on vacation in North Carolina, a literary agent keeps running into an editor.	15
10	9	**EVERY SUMMER AFTER,** by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) The love story of Percy and Sam is told over the course of six summers and one weekend.	9

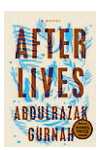
22

Nonfiction

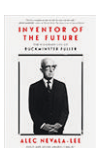
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1		**I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED,** by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	1
2	1	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	103
3		**PATH LIT BY LIGHTNING,** by David Maraniss. (Simon & Schuster) The life story of the Olympic athlete, All-American football player and Major League Baseball player Jim Thorpe.	1
4		**THE DESTRUCTIONISTS,** by Dana Milbank. (Doubleday) The Washington Post columnist describes Republican actions between the signing of the Contract With America and the Jan. 6 insurrection.	1
5	4	**BRAIDING SWEETGRASS,** by Robin Wall Kimmerer. (Milkweed Editions) A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation espouses having an understanding and appreciation of plants and animals.	49
6	6	**CRYING IN H MART,** by Michelle Zauner. (Knopf) The leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	46
7	2	**FINDING ME,** by Viola Davis. (HarperOne) The actress describes the difficulties she encountered before claiming her sense of self and achieving professional success.	16
8	14	**THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY,** by Erik Larson. (Vintage) How an architect and a serial killer were linked by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.	17
9	5	**EDUCATED,** by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.	144
10		**LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI,** by Rinker Buck. (Avid Reader) The author of "The Oregon Trail" recounts his adventures on a wooden flatboat and challenges the myths of American expansion.	1

The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors offering a wide range of general interest titles published in the United States. **ONLINE:** For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit ***www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers***.

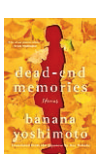
Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



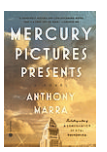
AFTERLIVES, by Abdulrazak Gurnah. (Riverhead, $28.) The Nobel laureate's latest novel to be published in the United States follows three primary characters in an unnamed coastal town in German East Africa in the early 1900s, one of whom decides to fight for the Germans in World War I; it is equally a love story and an exploration of war and imperialism.



INVENTOR OF THE FUTURE: The Visionary Life of Buckminster Fuller, by Alec Nevala-Lee. (Dey Street, $28.) Nevala-Lee's biography of Buckminster Fuller offers a comprehensive study of a complicated American futurist, who left enduring building concepts but also a string of failures in his wake. Best known for the geodesic dome, Fuller influenced disciplines from architecture to technology, often straining his private life with his ambitions.

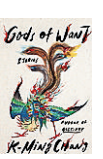


DEAD-END MEMORIES: Stories, by Banana Yoshimoto. Translated by Asa Yoneda. (Counterpoint, $26.) First published in Japan in 2003, the author's 11th book to be translated into English collects five strange, melancholy and beautiful stories of lonely women negotiating the quiet fallout of personal history.

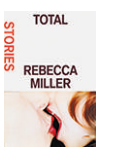


MERCURY PICTURES PRESENTS, by Anthony Marra. (Hogarth, $28.99.) Marra's elegant new novel follows the fortunes of an Italian immigrant in Hollywood during the Golden Age 1930s and '40s, where on the cusp of World War II she works at a B-movie studio that finds success by churning out American propaganda films.

COMPLICIT, by Winnie M Li. (Emily Bestler Books, $27.) In this harrowing, timely and thoroughly book-club-worthy thriller, a woman looks back on her brief, shining stint in the movie industry, where she crossed paths with an abusive producer, and reckons with regrettable decisions she made in the name of ambition.



GODS OF WANT: Stories, by K-Ming Chang. (One World, $27.) These stories by the Taiwanese American author of the gutsy 2020 debut novel "Bestiary" are obsessed with the vagaries of emigration and adolescence. Populated by ghosts and spirits, they dissolve the rigidities of American life into a slipstream of folkloric myth and transform the familiar world into something wilder.



TOTAL: Stories, by Rebecca Miller. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25.) Following a certain type of woman — the type who wields her sexuality and vulnerability as twinned powers — this collection plays with the ways that familiarity is also a comfort, and the ways stories and lives infinitely repeat.

THE BRITISH SURREALISTS, by Desmond Morris. (Thames & Hudson, $39.95.) Morris is best known as a zoologist and the author of "The Naked Ape" (among more than 40 other books). But in this entertaining compendium — 34 potted biographies of British Surrealists, many of whom he knew personally — Morris returns to his first love: art.

CALLING FOR A BLANKET DANCE, by Oscar Hokeah. (Algonquin, $27.) Hokeah's sweeping debut follows the life of a Native American man, Ever, as seen over the course of five decades, from 12 different vantage points. The result is a kaleidoscopic bildungsroman.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books

Inside the List

TINA JORDAN

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS ago this month, the book at the top of the fiction best-seller list was "Gentleman's Agreement," by **Laura Z. Hobson**, a "searing portrait of insidious, pervasive antisemitism in postwar American life" about a crusading magazine writer who passes himself off as Jewish in order to write a series on anti-semitism.

'I've got an idea for a book that . . . the public won't buy.'

"Gentleman's Agreement" wasn't a book Hobson ever expected to see at No. 1 — or on the list at all. When she first dreamed up the plot, she told her publisher, Simon & Schuster, "I've got an idea for a book that the magazines will never look at, the movies won't touch and the public won't buy. But I have to do it." She was wrong on all three counts: Cosmopolitan magazine excerpted the novel; the film version (produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, written by Moss Hart, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Gregory Peck) would go on to win Best Picture; and the novel was a smash hit that went back to press three times before its February 1947 publication date to meet bookstore demand.

"Gentleman's Agreement" got two reviews in The Times. In the Book Review, William Du Bois called it a "Grade-A tract which Mrs. Hobson has cleverly camouflaged as a novel"; but went on to say, "'Gentleman's Agreement' . . . is still required reading for every thoughtful citizen of this parlous century."

Charles Poore, the critic who reviewed the novel for the daily paper, was more effusive. "'Gentleman's Agreement,' by Laura Hobson, is bound to be one of the most-discussed novels of the year," he wrote. "It is . . . a courageous and penetrating study of human bigotry in terms of human lives. And it leaves unturned no stone under which the disquieting variety of bigots it exposes — among us all — can hide." He added that it was "interesting" to think about all the people reading "Gentleman's Agreement" during the coming summer "on the pleasant terraces of 'restricted' resorts. In a democracy."

A few weeks after the book came out, the Book Review published a lighthearted interview with Hobson in its "People Who Read and Write" column. She told the reporter that as she was putting the finishing touches on "Gentleman's Agreement," she asked her older son, who was 9, "What's prejudice, Mike?" He told her, "Well, I guess it's when you decide some fellow's a stinker before you ever met him."

"For that moment, anyway," the Book Review proclaimed, "Mrs. Hobson put herself at the head of the class." □

PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

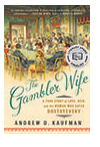
SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 7-13

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		**HEAT 2,** by Michael Mann and Meg Gardiner. (Morrow/Michael Mann) New adversaries confront returning characters in situations set before and after the events of the film "Heat."	1
2	1	**THE 6:20 MAN,** by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) When his ex-girlfriend turns up dead in his office building, an entry-level investment analyst delves into the halls of economic power.	5
3		**THE FAMILY REMAINS,** by Lisa Jewell. (Atria) Mysteries involving a decades-old cold case, a murder in France and a woman's return to London are connected.	1
4	3	**PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN WOMAN,** by Daniel Silva. (Harper) The 22nd book in the Gabriel Allon series. Allon becomes an art forger to uncover a multibillion-dollar fraud.	4
5	4	**THE HOTEL NANTUCKET,** by Elin Hilderbrand. (Little, Brown) The new general manager of a hotel far from its Gilded Age heyday deals with the complicated pasts of her guests and staff.	9
6	5	**THE IT GIRL,** by Ruth Ware. (Scout) A decade after her first year at Oxford, an expectant mother looks into the mystery of her former best friend's death.	5
7	7	**SPARRING PARTNERS,** by John Grisham. (Doubleday) Three novellas: "Homecoming," "Strawberry Moon" and "Sparring Partners."	11
8	2	**WRONG PLACE WRONG TIME,** by Gillian McAllister. (Morrow) A mother who witnesses her son murder a stranger finds her days are going in reverse and seeks to use that to alter events.	2
9	9	**TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW,** by Gabrielle Zevin. (Knopf) Two friends find their partnership challenged in the world of video game design.	6
10	8	**SHATTERED,** by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 14th book in the Michael Bennett series.	4

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		**I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED,** by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	1
2		**PATH LIT BY LIGHTNING,** by David Maraniss. (Simon & Schuster) The life story of the Olympic athlete, All-American football player and Major League Baseball player Jim Thorpe.	1
3	1	**FINDING ME,** by Viola Davis. (HarperOne) The actress describes the difficulties she encountered before claiming her sense of self and achieving professional success.	16
4	2	**CRYING IN H MART,** by Michelle Zauner. (Knopf) The leader of the indie rock project Japanese Breakfast describes creating her own identity after losing her mother to cancer.	56
5		**THE DESTRUCTIONISTS,** by Dana Milbank. (Doubleday) The Washington Post columnist describes Republican actions between the signing of the Contract With America and the Jan. 6 insurrection.	1
6		**SHY,** by Mary Rodgers and Jesse Green. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) The memoirs of the late composer, author and screenwriter, written with the chief theater critic at The New York Times.	1
7	3	**GREENLIGHTS,** by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over 35 years.	81
8		**LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI,** by Rinker Buck. (Avid Reader) The author of "The Oregon Trail" recounts his adventures on a wooden flatboat and challenges the myths of American expansion.	1
9	6	**BATTLE FOR THE AMERICAN MIND,** by Pete Hegseth with David Goodwin. (Broadside) The "Fox & Friends Weekend" host makes his case for what he calls classical Christian education. (†)	9
10	4	**WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?,** by Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey. (Flatiron) An approach to dealing with trauma that shifts an essential question used to investigate it.	41

An asterisk (*) indicates that a book's sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders.

Paperback Row / BY MIGUEL SALAZAR



THE GAMBLER WIFE: A True Story of Love, Risk, and the Woman Who Saved Dostoyevsky, by Andrew D. Kaufman. (Riverhead, 400 pp., $20.) This comprehensive biography of Anna Dostoyevskaya covers her first encounter with Dostoyevsky as a young stenographer, her poor and often agonized life as his second wife in a marriage held together by her superhuman selflessness and later as his iron-willed publisher.

THE WOMEN OF TROY, by Pat Barker. (Anchor, 304 pp., $17.) The second installment of Barker's feminist retelling of the "Iliad" is once again narrated by Briseis, a captive Trojan queen, as she struggles to survive and plot her revenge after the fall of Troy. Our Historical Fiction columnist, Alida Becker, wrote that, along with Barker's outrage, her "insight and compassion are on full display."

FUZZ: When Nature Breaks the Law, by Mary Roach. (Norton, 336 pp., $16.95.) Roach's exploration of monkey catchers, killer trees, cougar trackers and more is guided by a boundless curiosity and a desire to illuminate the territory where humanity and wildlife overlap and collide, making for "an idiosyncratic tour with Roach as the wisecracking, ever-probing guide," as our reviewer, Vicki Constantine Croke, wrote.

SULTANA'S DREAM AND PADMARAG, by Rokeya Hossain. Translated by Barnita Bagchi. (Penguin Classics, 240 pp., $16.) This book presents Hossain's classic sci-fi utopian novel, first published in 1905, which imagines a world where women rule through science and men are relegated to domestic life. It also includes the Bengali author's novella about a women-run school and welfare center.

CONFRONTING CAPITALISM: How the World Works and How to Change It, by Vivek Chibber. (Verso, 176 pp., $19.95.) In this slim but mighty account, a social theorist and sociology professor at New York University tackles the issues of global inequality, extreme wealth and rampant corruption in democratic countries. He explains the structures of global capitalism and addresses how the world can move toward a more equitable future.

THE FAMILY CHAO, by Lan Samantha Chang. (Norton, 320 pp., $16.95.) Chang's third novel, an engrossing and darkly comedic take on "The Brothers Karamazov," tells a focused and highly readable story about the fortunes of a dysfunctional Chinese immigrant family splintered by the murder of the patriarch, a man disliked by just about everyone in his small Wisconsin town.

PAPERBACK

SALES PERIOD OF AUGUST 7-13

Paperback Trade Fiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**IT ENDS WITH US,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.	67
2	2	**WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.	72
3	3	**VERITY,** by Colleen Hoover. (Grand Central) Lowen Ashleigh is hired by the husband of an injured writer to complete her popular series and uncovers a horrifying truth.	53
4	4	**UGLY LOVE,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A casual sexual relationship between Tate and Miles becomes more complicated than they expected.	55
5	5	**THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO,** by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.	75
6	6	**NOVEMBER 9,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Ben and Fallon meet on the same day each year but a possible untruth might spoil their relationship.	39
7	7	**ALL YOUR PERFECTS,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Quinn and Graham's marriage depends on past promises.	17
8	10	**BOOK LOVERS,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) While on vacation in North Carolina, a literary agent keeps running into an editor.	15
9	13	**PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) Opposites Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together one more time in hopes of saving their relationship.	66
10	8	**EVERY SUMMER AFTER,** by Carley Fortune. (Berkley) The love story of Percy and Sam is told over the course of six summers and one weekend.	10
11	12	**THE SILENT PATIENT,** by Alex Michaelides. (Celadon) Theo Faber looks into the mystery of a famous painter who stops speaking after shooting her husband.	52
12	11	**MAYBE SOMEDAY,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) When a college student finds out her boyfriend is cheating on her, she turns her attention to her guitar-playing neighbor.	4
13	9	**CONFESS,** by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) Auburn Reed falls for an artist with a troubled past.	5
14	14	**BEACH READ,** by Emily Henry. (Berkley) A relationship develops between a literary fiction author and a romance novelist as they both try to overcome writer's block.	50
15		**THE WISH,** by Nicholas Sparks. (Grand Central) Maggie Dawes, a renowned travel photographer, struggles with a medical diagnosis over Christmas.	1

Paperback Nonfiction

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK		WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	**THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE,** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	199
2	3	**BRAIDING SWEETGRASS,** by Robin Wall Kimmerer. (Milkweed Editions) A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation espouses having an understanding and appreciation of plants and animals.	122
3	4	**EDUCATED,** by Tara Westover. (Random House) The daughter of survivalists, who is kept out of school, educates herself enough to leave home for university.	27
4	2	**THIS IS YOUR MIND ON PLANTS,** by Michael Pollan. (Penguin) A look at arbitrary beliefs surrounding opium, caffeine and mescaline, which are derived from plants.	4
5	6	**BORN A CRIME,** by Trevor Noah. (One World) A memoir by the host of "The Daily Show."	169
6	7	**THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY,** by Erik Larson. (Vintage) A story of how an architect and a serial killer were linked by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.	372
7	5	**ALL ABOUT LOVE,** by bell hooks. (Morrow) The late feminist icon explores the causes of a polarized society and the meaning of love.	36
8	8	**TALKING TO STRANGERS,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) Famous examples of miscommunication.	46
9	10	**THE BOMBER MAFIA,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) A look at the key players and outcomes of precision bombing during World War II.	10
10	13	**THE GLASS CASTLE,** by Jeannette Walls. (Scribner) The author recalls how she and her siblings were constantly moved from one bleak place to another. (†)	456
11	11	**JUST MERCY,** by Bryan Stevenson. (One World) A civil rights lawyer's memoir of his decades of work to free innocent people condemned to death.	289
12	9	**OUTLIERS,** by Malcolm Gladwell. (Back Bay) Unexpected factors that explain why some people succeed, such as upbringing, timing and 10,000 hours of deliberate practice.	354
13	14	**THINKING, FAST AND SLOW,** by Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) When we can and cannot trust our intuitions.	328
14	12	**GRIT,** by Angela Duckworth. (Scribner) The MacArthur Fellow argues that passion and perseverance are more important than innate talent in creating success.	121
15	15	**BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS,** by Suleika Jaouad. (Random House) The writer of the New York Times column "Life, Interrupted" chronicles her fight with cancer and an impactful road trip.	14

Sales are defined as completed transactions between vendors and individual end users during the period on or after the official publication date of a title. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. The panel of reporting retailers is comprehensive and reflects sales in tens of thousands of stores of all sizes and demographics across the United States. **ONLINE:** For a full explanation of our methodology, visit **www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.**

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THE SCENT OF BURNT FLOWERS
By Blitz Bazawule
235 pp. Ballantine. $27.

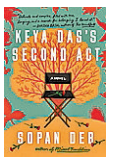
Blitz Bazawule's vibrant, funny thriller begins, quite literally, with a bang. In 1966, the young, beautiful Bernadette awakes in Accra to the sound of gunfire and believes that her fiancé, Melvin, has shot himself. "She had feared this day would come, yet nothing could prepare her for it." But Bernadette need not fear, yet, for the explosion that wakes her is the sound of jubilant Ghanaians celebrating the New Year. It's clever, if not especially subtle, foreshadowing of the violence that will stalk the young couple as they speed across Ghana, seeking safety in a country on the verge of a coup.

The Black American couple have arrived in Africa after an initially unexplained incident in Alabama forces them to flee. Mel hopes that President Nkrumah of Ghana, with whom Mel studied in college years before, will offer them sanctuary. They join a popular — and handsome — highlife musician named Kwesi on the road; a will-they-or-won't-they dynamic ensues as Bernadette and Kwesi circle each other, their connection taking on a mystical significance that proves impossible for either to ignore. Mel watches from the sidelines, bitter that the ruin he's made of his life is further complicated by his fiancée's infatuation with the captivating Kwesi. Following them is an inept white F.B.I. agent whose past failures have him single-mindedly intent on capturing the pair.

Bazawule, the novel's polymath author, is juggling a lot here. The novel tackles colonialism, racism and misogyny; interspersed throughout its classic thriller structure are bizarre scenes of magical transformation, as soldiers become animals, flowers burst from guitars and women breathe underwater.

Yet the novel is skillfully crafted, never buckling beneath the weight of its ambition, with an unflagging sense of humor that prevents the story from straying into self-seriousness. When Mel, frustrated with his repeated failed attempts to contact Nkrumah, sits down to write another letter, his only instrument is a typewriter missing the letter "r." "I am in g eat need of you help. It is a matte of life and death," Mel writes, his desperation contrasted by the absurdity of the letter he writes — further evidence that the fates are not, and will never be, on Mel's side. They are, however, in on the joke.

KEYA DAS'S SECOND ACT
By Sopan Deb
268 pp. Simon & Schuster. $26.

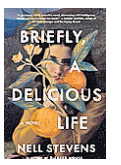


The refuge that can be found in the transformation of performance roots the New York Times journalist Sopan Deb's heartfelt "Keya Das's Second Act." Keya, a high schooler, dies in an accident shortly after she comes out to her Bengali family, who coldly rejected her in her moment of vulnerability. The guilt and shame that trail Keya's family after her death destroys the household: Her parents divorce, and her older sister, Mitali, while successful in her marketing career, is uninspired, lonely and quietly stricken with grief. When Keya's languishing father, Shantanu, discovers a play she co-wrote with her girlfriend, Pamela, the Dases — with the help of Mitali's awkward but sincere new boyfriend, a musician named Neesh — endeavor to stage the play and pay tribute to the daughter and sister they treated so poorly while she was still alive.

Despite its heavy subject matter, the novel is a light and easy read, the sort of book you'd pick up while kicking back in an Adirondack chair and sipping a gin and tonic. Shantanu is a lovable mess whose dependence upon Froot Loops for sustenance and emotional support I found delightfully relatable. And though each character has allowed tragedy to splinter their families and propel them into chaos, they're all anchored by a genuine desire to clean up their lives and do right by one another and by Keya.

Though charming, the first half of the book is imperfect, with a comically evil father figure and an unnecessary subplot about a character's past life as a thief threatening to derail the story. The novel is stronger in the second act; as the play is set into motion, the Dases — and the book itself — find their momentum. Keya and Pamela's script, of which we are offered tantalizing snippets, is convincing in its portrayal of adolescent fury and is poetic and wise in that accidental way that only art made by children can be, their insight guileless and unsullied by pretension. "I've been coming to this tree for two years with you, and I still don't know anything about myself," one of the play's characters says. "I thank you for that."

BRIEFLY, A DELICIOUS LIFE
By Nell Stevens
294 pp. Scribner. $26.99.



By the time George Sand and Frédéric Chopin show up at her monastery, Blanca, the audacious protagonist of Nell Stevens's exquisite debut novel, hasn't experienced much — even though she's been a ghost for almost 400 years. Blanca has never ventured far beyond the remote Mallorcan monastery where she died, so she is surprised and delighted when George, unusual and enchanting, settles with her family for the season on the island in an attempt to heal the sickly Chopin.

Though the novel's most obvious selling point is its reimagining of Chopin and George's brief and disastrous time on Mallorca, Blanca is the story's heart. She's a charming, witty character whose vulnerability and occasional gloom make her an irresistible narrator. Still, like many ghosts, she is tempestuous and vengeful, creeping into and unsettling the minds of the lecherous men who make the female villagers' lives miserable. It isn't until she falls for the unsuspecting George that Blanca realizes her ghostly ability to melt into a living person and gain full access to their memories and senses can bring her joy and pleasure. "To taste her mouth, really taste it, the dusty tobacco taste of her saliva," Blanca says after slipping into George's body. "Her tongue, rough and firm and granular." It's both agony and bliss for Blanca, whose centuries have been shaped by anger and pain, and whose fleeting experience of love led to betrayal and her eventual death.

Before long, disaster strikes. Blanca is at first smitten, then heartbroken and depressed, as George and Chopin's family respite turns catastrophic. The story of Blanca's life unfurls alongside the story of her death, and the tragedy that kills her collides spectacularly with the strange new hope she discovers amid the wreckage of the monastery at the novel's end. I confess: I cried. The entire novel is imbued with reverence for small moments; Blanca describes her love for George as finding a detail as insignificant as a hangnail "entirely overwhelming, too lovely to bear." Blanca's story is much the same — overwhelming, too lovely to bear.

ANGELA LASHBROOK *is a writer whose work has appeared in The Guardian, Slate and Vice.*

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

Up Close / Escape Fantasy / By Lauren Christensen

A new book reveals the artistic range, and wandering imagination, of Maurice Sendak.

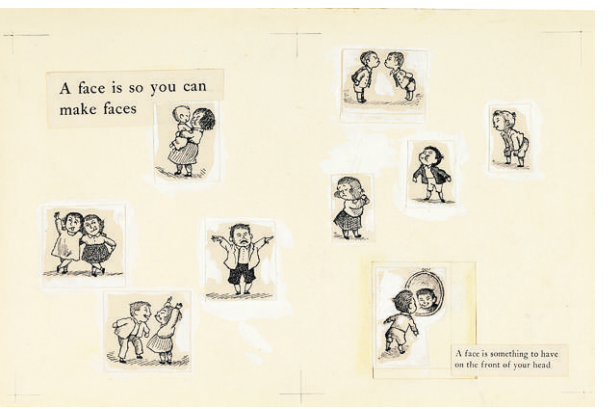
"WHERE IS FAR AWAY?" Martin asks his preoccupied mother at the start of the 1957 children's book "Very Far Away." Its 28-year-old author and illustrator, Maurice Sendak, would spend his life searching for an answer.

Though best known for the crosshatched monsters in his 1963 classic, "Where the Wild Things Are," Sendak experimented widely in style and genre over his six-decade career, creating picture books, comics, opera and ballet sets and more. As he put it in 1971, "The more styles you have, the better."

He drew these styles from an ever-expanding "artistic genealogy," as his friend and curator Jonathan Weinberg writes in **WILD THINGS ARE HAPPENING (Columbus Museum of Art/DelMonico Books, $55)**, including Mozart and William Blake, Titian and El Greco, Beatrix Potter, Herman Melville, John Keats. The book accompanies the first major retrospective of Sendak's work since he died in 2012, at the Columbus Museum of Art.

Born in Brooklyn in 1928, Sendak said that the idea for "Where the Wild Things Are" came from his family of Polish Jewish immigrants, who called him "vilde chayes" — Yiddish for "wild beast" — when he misbehaved. From sketching other kids playing in the street outside his childhood window, to the long, regimented days spent drawing, painting and writing in his Connecticut studio as an adult, Sendak remained dedicated all his life to at least one theme: wandering. Whether in dreams or on foot or sailing across the ocean, his characters are united by a "sense of longing and expectation," Weinberg writes, "fantasizing about escape." □

The watercolor figures in "Where the Wild Things Are" paved the way for more complex feelings and ideas in children's literature.



Illustrations for Ruth Krauss's "A Hole Is to Dig," 1952.

Sendak's "Fly by Night," 1976, ink on paper.

Sendak's "Self-Portrait," 1948.

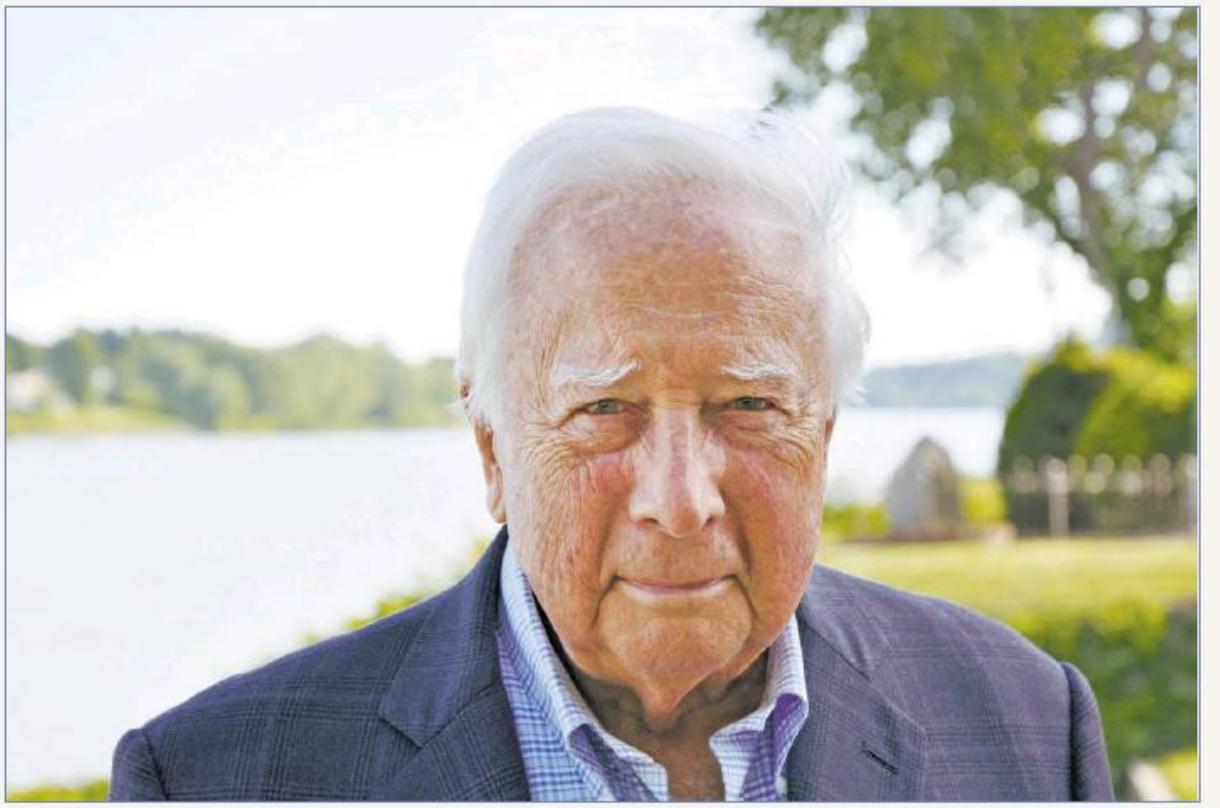
Sendak's dog Jennie in "Higglety, Pigglety, Pop!," 1967.

Watercolor strips bearing a provisional title, 1955.

LAUREN CHRISTENSEN *is an editor at the Book Review.*

IMAGES FROM THE MAURICE SENDAK FOUNDATION; "WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE" AND "A HOLE IS TO DIG" USED BY PERMISSION OF HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS

In Memoriam



David McCullough
1933—2022

"Real success is finding your lifework in the work that you love."
—David McCullough

Simon & Schuster